

## Chulas fronteras

By David Wilt

Although it may be difficult to imagine in today's multicultural world with its interest in and appreciation of global culture, not so many years ago regional music was largely unknown outside of its specific audience. "Race" and ethnic records were produced and sold locally, or narrowly marketed to insular communities. A handful of ethnomusicologists and dedicated amateurs worked to record, preserve, and—whenever possible—expose this music to a wider audience.

"Chulas fronteras" (Beautiful Borderlands) was the product of two such individuals, documentarian Les Blank (1935-2013) and Chris Strachwitz, who left his job as a high school teacher to found Arhoolie Records. Blank had previously made two films about bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins ("Lightnin' Les" and "The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins"); he and Strachwitz formed Brazos Films to make a documentary on Tex-Mex music, one of Strachwitz's favorite regional music genres.

"We had no pre-conceived idea as to the scope of the film beyond documenting the musicians and their role in the culture," Strachwitz later said. Tex-Mex music, as its name implies, developed along the border between Mexico and Texas, defined by the Rio Grande (Río Bravo to Mexicans). Although the two genres later diverged somewhat, Tex-Mex and *norteño* music of Mexico were originally quite similar, featuring small groups called *conjuntos*, close harmony, and a predilection for both narrative lyrics and danceable instrumentals.

Both Tex-Mex and *norteño* music utilized similar instrumentation. Mexico contributed the *bajo sexto*, a guitar-like instrument, while Texas added the ubiquitous accordion, borrowed from polka-loving German emigrants to the state. Although many songs are standard tales of unrequited or dysfunctional love—Lydia Mendoza's rendition of "Malhombre" and "La nueva Zenaida" by Flaco Jiménez are two examples heard in "Chulas fronteras"—Tex-Mex music also incorporated the immigrant (and second/third generation) experience in its themes. The documentary begins with a rendition of the "Canción mixteca," a song written about internal migration (from the provinces to Mexico City), but later adopted by Mexican immigrants pining for their homeland. More specific



Lydia Mendoza, early in her career as "La Alondra de la Frontera" ("The Lark of the Border"). Mendoza was one of the pre-eminent Tejano musicians beginning in the 1930s. Courtesy Les Blank Films.

political and social content is heard later in the film: "Los rinches de Texas" [The Texas Rangers], the "Corrido de César Chávez," and "Chicano" all refer to cultural/political clashes between Mexican-Americans and the Anglo American power structure. But Tex-Mex music also reflects the pride of Mexican-Americans in both their Mexican heritage and their American citizenship; concludes with the song "Mexico-Americano" that celebrates this duality.

The term "documentary film" encompasses an extremely diverse range of styles, from rigidly structured, heavily narrated, instructional or didactic works to improvisational, slice-of-life *cinéma-vérité*. Les Blank utilizes an eclectic mix of film techniques in "Chulas fronteras": talking-head interviews; film of live performances; recordings played over actuality footage of the Texas countryside, migrant workers in the fields, and records being pressed by hand; vintage photographs; scenes of people at work and in social situations. Thus, some sections resemble a traditional, interview-based documentary, while others reside in the more abstract, "tone poem" (or, to use a term that didn't exist at the time--although prototypical examples had existed for decades--a "music video") end of the spectrum, with much of "Chulas fronteras" falling between these two extremes.

Although not structured in a conventional, historical-chronological manner, "Chulas fronteras" is roughly separated into four sections: Introduction to the Region, Two Pioneer Recording Artists (Narciso Martínez and Lydia Mendoza), The Harsh Life of Migrant Farm Workers, and The Regional Record Business and other Pioneer Recording Artists.

Blank and Strachwitz introduce the viewer to veteran performers like Narciso Martínez, Lydia Mendoza, Santiago Jiménez and Los Alegres de Terán, as well as more contemporary Tex-Mex musicians such as Flaco Jiménez, Rumel Fuentes, and Los Pinguinos del Norte. Composer and producer José Morante, radio personality and songwriter Willie López, and composer/record producer Salomé Gutiérrez provide additional commentary on the creation and dissemination of this musical genre. Tex-Mex music, like other regional or ethnic musical genres in this era, was a labor of love for all involved: the financial rewards and fame were hardly comparable to those enjoyed by members of the mainstream music industry. Footage of Narciso Martínez in his day job (at the San Benito Zoo) accompanies some of his music and illustrates this point--playing Tex-Mex music fed the soul, not the body.

The film revolves around social and familial relationships in the Mexican-American culture which fostered Tex-Mex music. While there are several sequences shot in "traditional" performance venues (dances, clubs), many of the songs in the film are performed at (or played over footage of) private gatherings such as an anniversary party, a holiday celebration, a barbecue, a mock cockfight, a political campaign event, and a birthday party (complete with a *piñata*). Family ties are emphasized: three generations of the Jiménez family are depicted, from patriarch Santiago, son Flaco, and Flaco's own son David (shown learning the accordion). Before we

see Rumel Fuentes singing "Chicano," we're exposed to his brother Diddy, who discusses his decision to avoid migrant work because of the constant travel's disruptive effect on his family. Eugenio Abrego, half of the famous duet "Los Alegres de Terán," talks about receiving his first accordion from his father, and his wife discusses her initial meeting with her future husband, 30 years earlier, as her children interpret. Tex-Mex music is clearly an integral part of the social fabric of the Mexican-American community, and is conveyed from generation to generation.

Informative yet informal, "Chulas fronteras" is a fascinating and vibrant portrait of a musical style which reflects the bi-cultural heritage of its creators and consumers.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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