

“La Chicharronera”--Narciso Martinez and Santiago Almeida (1936)

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Essay by Hector Saldaña (guest post)*



Martinez and Almeida

To fully appreciate the historical significance of a nearly 90-year-old *conjunto* polka recording, considered to a building block of Tejano music, one must try to imagine Depression-era Texas--post-Mexican Revolution, post-World War I and soon on the cusp of World War II.

Texas is segregated, rural and agricultural in the mid-1930s. There are stark class differences. Many Mexicans and Mexican Americans are poor and often residing in *colonias* (shantytowns) on the edges of cities. Latinos are looked upon with suspicion.

“La Chicharronera” (“The Pork Skin Lady”), by button accordionist Narciso Martínez and *bajo sexto* musician Santiago Almeida of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, was born in that long-ago age. The seminal 1936 recording--a hit and among the earliest known *conjunto* records with accordion and *bajo sexto* instrumentation--was a pivotal moment in the history of Tejano music. It marked the emergence of a new and original American music ensemble and style.

That same year, the Texas Centennial marked 100 years of independence from Mexico. But the previous 25 years in Texas had seen a growing Mexican influence and Mexican and Latino population.

Mexican-Americans of means and new immigrants settled in the cities of South Texas, assimilating and establishing networks of social clubs, newspapers, businesses, and movie houses. It was the dawn of the golden age of Mexican cinema and the romantic Mexican singing movie star and of art deco. Only a few years earlier, classically trained Latino musicians had provided the live music soundtrack to silent films from the orchestra pit.

Conjunto music was something different, the down-home rural music of *la raza* (the people) – migrant workers and the poor. The humble instrumental polka “La Chicharronera,” spoke to them just as Lydia Mendoza’s haunting first solo recording “Mal Hombre” had in 1934,

connecting as powerfully as the blues. In the modern vernacular it was about identity. And the music was visceral.

“La Chicharronera” was recorded (along with 19 other songs by the duo) in San Antonio on October 21, 1936. It was released on RCA Victor’s budget label Bluebird Records, the home for early blues and jazz recordings by African American musicians and white rural country musicians.

But Martínez and Almeida’s “La Chicharronera” is not alone as the source of the conjunto music spring. That same year, a young man known as “El Flaco,” Santiago Jimenez of San Antonio, recorded his first record “Dices Pescao” on the Decca label. Jimenez’s polka featured innovative use of button accordion, bajo sexto and added *tololoche* (upright bass).

The two-piece instrumentation of “La Chicharronera” made it easy to enjoy and to copy. Simplicity played a role in its appeal and also put the spotlight on Martínez’s playing. It is the duo’s first issued recording--but Martínez’s name is in much larger type size than Almeida and he is already establishing his nickname, El Huracán del Valle. He is clearly the star. Almeida’s instrument is listed generically as a *guitarra*.

Nicknames like El Huracán del Valle and El Flaco--who were musical rivals--were as important as a boxer’s or a gangster’s nickname to their personas. These were not names hoisted on them by a record company; they were bold proclamations. These young musicians had arrived.

The youthful, stripped-down music eschewed the romantic violins, flutes, guitars, guitarrons, banjos, double bass, drum and brass variants of classically trained Mexican *orquestas* for solely essential elements: melody, head-snapping rhythm and pronounced and percussive bass lines.

Upbeat, earthy and steeped in German and Czech music polka influences, “La Chicharronera” not only set a sonic template (Martinez was called the Hurricane of the Valley for his nimble dexterity on his two-row button instrument) but because it reflected the spirit, attitude and culture of the burgeoning Mexican and Latino population of the state.

Its title said it all: a celebration of the women street food vendors who sold fried pork skins and cracklins for a few cents. In large kettles of lard over a fire, small chards of dry pig skins would instantly blister to the size of one’s hand as soon as they were dropped in. Floating to the top, they were skimmed out making for a greasy, crispy delicacy. A fast and popular snack.

“La Chicharronera” firmly established and memorialized the down-home and gritty music’s trademark presentation that continues to this day: button accordion for melody and bajo sexto--a Mexican 12-string instrument tuned in fourths and with half its doubled strings tuned in octaves and the other half tuned in unison--for punctuating bass lines and sharply struck rhythm chords with the power of a locomotive’s steam engine.

“It became a standard,” said Juan Tejada, who founded the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center’s long-running Tejano Conjunto Festival in San Antonio where Martinez, near the end of his life,

was a beloved attraction, “Musicians learned it.” Artists like Felix Borraro and Juan Lopez recorded it.

“La Chicharronera” and all the polkas it inspired were played at dances, on the radio, on porches, in the fields, in migrant camps, in city plazas, and at baptisms, birthdays and other cultural celebrations--and yes, cantinas and red-light districts.

The recording earned Martinez the title of Father of Conjunto Music in Texas. Only Santiago Jimenez, who began his recording career earlier and is the father of Leonardo “Flaco” Jimenez, rivals Martinez for that title as a composer of influential instrumental polkas to follow, “La Piedrera” (“The Rock Quarry”) and “Viva Seguin,” as well as some incredible, heartfelt lyrics which came later.

But where Martinez was lightning fast and flashy in his finger work on the accordion, Jimenez had a simpler, more soulful and sentimental approach. Both men were essentially regional artists sticking close to home but drawing on a variety of Latin American styles, from boleros and *huapangos* to waltzes and *redovas*.

Others innovative musicians would expand on the concept of the conjunto, adding lyrics, drums, double bass and horns. But in the beginning, it just took two instruments. For example, Valerio Longoria would draw on the influence of Martinez and Almeida, for his classic instrumental “El Polquerito.” Esteban “Steve” Jordan would combine conjunto with rock, R&B, jazz and *cathartic gritos*.

Almeida is a giant of his bajo sexto instrument. He influenced such revered figures as the late Oscar Tellez of Texas Tornados fame and Grammy winner Max Baca of Los TexManiacs, who is considered a modern virtuoso. But for those who remember, “Santiago Almeida was top dog for the bajo sexto,” Flaco Jimenez added.

And it’s not without a sense of pride that the duo traveled to the big city--much like the Carter Family had come out of the hills to invent country music--to make their record in San Antonio. There is even a mysterious element, echoing the story of bluesman Robert Johnson’s sessions, in trying to pin down the exact place where “La Chicharronera” was recorded. Was it in a hotel room? In a furniture store? Not in dispute is that its origins were humble and its ripples eternal.

Martinez and Almeida were masters of their respective instruments and were recognized in their lifetimes. Both musicians were recipients of the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship award and inductees to Conjunto Halls of Fame. But the addition of their recording of “La Chicharronera” to the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress celebrates their contribution from the very beginning.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.