

"Uno, Dos, One,

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



Two, Tres, Quatro. . .”

By Joe Nick Patoski

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, Mexican Americans all over Texas were doing their own interpretation of rock and roll, filtering it through an ethnic gauze that rendered the music slower and more rhythm-heavy, swaying and braying with backbeats that accentuated hip shaking and framed around a singer voicing sentiments forever sincere, my dearest darling, *con cariño*. Like all variations of early rock, black music provided the strongest influences—blues, rhythm 'n blues, doo wop, soul—only Tex-Mex threw those sounds back into the mainstream simmered in spice and salsa. Groups from San Antonio's El West Side, such as Charlie and the Jives and Sonny Ace y los Twisters, were just as fluent in Louis Prima, and just as

prone to cover Bobby Blue Bland and Little Junior Parker as their white and black *compadres*, while doo-wop was the bread and butter of The Royal Jesters, Rudy and the Reno Bops, and Los Dinos. All of the above were regional stars, thanks to thriving recording scenes in San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley, and radio shows like Joe



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

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

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

