

# MEXICO'S NASHVILLE

BY SERGIO MARTÍNEZ

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Arco de la Independencia (1910, Alfred Giles).

**MY MOTHER TELLS** me that my grandfather Ezequiel liked parties and sharing good times with his friends. We're talking about the 1930s, the young adulthood of my grandparents, the childhood of my mother, a Monterrey of possibly 100,000 inhabitants. Almost every weekend, my grandparents converted their house into a kind of party hall. They butchered a sheep or kid goat, or maybe a calf if the party was very big, and they arranged a big pit barbecue. Or if they had a pig, there was a little festival of chicharrones, carnitas, and other delicacies of the Mexican country kitchen.

Music wasn't lacking. It was *norteño*, the regional music of northeastern Mexico — a rural, working-class music, the country music of Mexico. All the music of Nuevo León comes from the farms (at least the music that has lasted), but its roots are surprisingly cosmopolitan. They lie in central Europe, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the salon dances from the middle of the 19th century. The polka, the dedova, the schottische, the mazurka, the contradanza, the waltz — all are from central Europe. And all have made their way to northeastern Mexico.

The exceptions are the *huapango* and the *corrido*, subgenres with Mexican mestizo origins. Spanish influence declares itself in the guapango's rhythm and the *corrido*'s words. Perhaps the *corrido*, or story song, is descended from the *romanza*, the medium through which one village sang the news to another. But now, instead of talking about tragic lovers, fights caused by women, and stories from the Revolution, modern *corridos* tell stories of drug runners.

Speaking of *corridos*, my mother tells me my grandfather, like everyone else, was honored by a *corrido* that described his qualities and good humor. He probably paid to have it written for him; I don't believe he was always in a good humor.

Even today, the Monterrey region's groups continue to perform at parties, drinking sprees, weddings and baptisms,



Photo Courtesy of Fonovisa

The globalized accordion: Priscila y sus Balas de Plata.

and of course, serenades for girlfriends, mothers, and lovers. Any local person can contract a duet or trio in the street, in a place called El Arco, which is a small monument in the middle of a principal avenue of Monterrey.

Ever since the days of my grandfather, El Arco was the meeting place for musicians, not only for the regional musicians — each group with an accordion and bajo sexto, a bass with six double strings — but also for the mariachis and the romantic trios, groups whose roots lie in other regions of Mexico. Potential employers stand on the avenue to audition the groups, who are picked up by passing cars and taken to the party.

In the 1940s, *norteño* was heard only rarely outside northeastern Mexico. The

stars of Mexican cinema — Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Antonio Aguilar — favored other regions' music. Only El Piporro, a campy comedian, sang *norteño* in the movies.

As American and European pop and rock conquered Mexico, *norteño* — considered a hick music — went underground. It's not that *norteño* disappeared, just that it didn't belong to the dominant culture. When it appeared on TV, it was local TV. *Norteño* wasn't played much on radio; it lived mainly through live performances.

In the '70s, *norteño* musicians began substituting electronic keyboard instruments for the accordion. At first they used a kind of electronic organ; later, synthesizers. A new genre was born: *grupera* music. In *grupera*, there are no soloists — only groups, such as Bronco or La Mafia.

In the '80s, radio programmers began offering Mexicans music in their own language. Suddenly, *norteño* commanded the eyes and ears of all Mexico — and also of fans in the United States. Dances (really concerts) drew up to 150,000 people. To accommodate the crowds, *norteño* events were held in parks and even soccer stadiums.

Bronco's lead singer, Lupe Esparza, opened his own recording studio in Monterrey, and Los Temararios and other groups soon followed suit. Monterrey became Mexico's Nashville, its country-music capital.

*Norteño*'s popularity favored an interchange between Mexico and the United States — not just a commercial interchange, but a cultural one as well. In Texas, accordion-driven music had survived as *Tejano*, *norteño*'s American relative. As *Tejano* interbred with *norteño* and *grupera*, the *norteño* accordion resurfaced, reclaiming some of the ground it had lost to the keyboard. Record sales in both genres soared.

*Tejano* superstar Selena paved the way for *norteño*'s first wildly popular female singer, Grupo Límite's Alicia Villarreal, of Monterrey. Villarreal was in turn followed by the genre's first popular female accordionist, Priscila Camacho, of Priscila y sus Balas de Plata. Camacho, who lives and records her light, pop-influenced songs in Monterrey, has said that as a child she was inspired to learn the accordion after watching a performance by *norteño* accordion king Ramón Ayala. Ayala lives in San Antonio.

In this way, Texas and northern Mexico reclaimed their unity. Music ignored the border. ■

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*Translated from Spanish by David Theis.*