Tejano Proud:
Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century
By Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

This is an excellent multidimensional study of música tejana in the twentieth century. Beginning with early attempts by national recording companies to commercialize Texas-Mexican music in the late 1920s, Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., explores the main stylistic features and adaptations of this diverse genre of music, as well as the major social, political, and cultural forces that shaped its ensembles and styles over the next seventy years. Emphasizing música tejana as a complex array of dynamic musical forms, he discusses the wide range of musical ensembles—the conjunto, vocal groups, progressive conjuntos, orquestas, grupos, and Chicano country bands—that have played it. He analyzes the evolution of música tejana in the context of a borderlands culture that nurtured its growth and creative expression.

San Miguel, Jr., begins by showing that the recording industry by the 1930s had contributed significantly to the growing popularity of conjunto music, particularly among agricultural workers in South and Central Texas. This popularization of conjunto benefited from immigration, stylistic changes in ensembles and the mix of instruments, Spanish-language radio, and a growing number of jukeboxes, record players, entrepreneurs, and dance promoters. Although record companies and Spanish-language radio stations did record and play corridos, canciones típicas, huapangos, and other styles of music, diversity had become a casualty of the growing commercialization of música tejana by 1941.

The popularity of música tejana after World War II was due in large part to the formation of two recording companies—Discos Ideal, set up by Armando Marroquín and Paco Betancourt in 1947, and Discos Falcon, which was founded by Arnaldo Ramírez a few years later. These companies contributed to the rise of a number of popular Tejano artists who recorded for its label, including several women—particularly Lydia Mendoza, Chelo Silva, and Carmen y Laura—who shaped the Tejano recording industry in the 1950s. Thanks in large part to these recording companies and artists, the orquesta tejana and conjunto dominated all other forms of música tejana through the 1960s.

Although Chicano political activists embraced conjunto as an important cultural expression of the tejano community, conjunto suffered an overall decline in the 1970s and 1980s. San Miguel, Jr., attributes this decline to the rise of a more urban, acculturated Tejano middle class that associated the accordion and conjunto with the more bawdy, rowdy features of working-class culture and life in the barrios. He also points out that with few exceptions—most notably, Steve Jordan y El Río Jordan and Chavela y Brown Express—conjunto musicians continued to cling to tradition by playing mostly polkas and rancheras. They failed to incorporate rock and roll, contemporary soul, and other innovative styles that had become popular in the 1960s. As a result, older artists such as Tony de la Rosa, Rubén Vela, and Henry Zimmerle maintained their popularity, but conjunto had little appeal to youth in the 1970s and 1980s.

San Miguel, Jr., calls attention to the important role of Emilio Navaira's música in the resurgence of traditional conjunto in the early 1990s. Because of several adaptations and innovations, including the incorporation of country and rock influences, Navaira enjoyed great popularity and success in the tejano community as he sparked renewed interest in the accordion. The revival of conjunto was nurtured also by an annual conjunto festival in San Antonio, the creation of a traditional and progressive conjunto award category in the annual Tejano Music Awards, a growing number of bilingual tejano FM radio stations, and the expanded role of major record companies in the Tejano music industry.

In the late 1980s, Sony Discos, Capitol-EMI, and other major labels launched a concerted effort to find Tejano crossover groups that might attract audiences in the international Spanish-speaking as well as the domestic English-language market. San Miguel, Jr., points out that this led to selective recordings of cumbias and baladas for audiences in Mexico and Latin America. Among the grupos tejanos that spearheaded efforts to internationalize música tejana in the 1990s were La Maffia, Mazz, and Selena, who toured outside the United States, particularly in Mexico. Selena, who had a number of regional and international hits, developed an impressive repertoire of songs that reflected pop, rap, rock, dance, hip-hop, and mariachi influences. She also incorporated choreography and charisma into her performances. At the time of her murder in 1995, she was on the verge of becoming a huge international star.

This is a well-written book that makes important contributions to the history of music, popular culture, and ethnic studies. It is a highly nuanced study that takes into account class, ethnic, and gender considerations, and it pays attention to the important role of dance and instrument arrangements. Tejano Proud complements Manuel Peña's excellent book, Música Tejana, with whom San Miguel, Jr., has a few minor interpretive differences. I highly recommend it for classroom adoption.

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