

Tony de la Rosa

De La Rosa, Antonio “Tony.” Award-winning pioneer of *conjunto* music; b. Sarita, Texas, on October 31, 1931; d. Corpus Christi, Texas, on June 2, 2004. Born just south of Kingsville in a worker’s hacienda on the King Ranch and one of twelve children in a family of field laborers, De La Rosa began playing music as a child. At the age of six, his mother taught him harmonica. Soon afterward, he heard the accordion on the kitchen radio and decided he wanted to play that instrument. By the age of sixteen, he had learned to play a two-row, button accordion, which he had ordered for seven dollars from a Montgomery Ward catalog.



De La Rosa was inspired by some of the earlier *conjunto* pioneers, such as Narciso Martínez and Santiago Jiménez, but western swing and honky tonk music also had an impact on his professional career. In fact, De la Rosa was so fond of country music, that, by the time he was a teenager, he was playing with country bands in small clubs around Kingsville. In later years, he would borrow from country singer Red Foley’s popular song “Alabama Jubilee” to compose one of De la Rosa’s best-known polkas, “El Circo.”

In 1949, De la Rosa formed his own *conjunto* band, which included himself on accordion and vocals, along with Abel Mendoza (vocals and *bajo sexto*), Adán de la Rosa (drums, vocals, and *bajo sexto*), Adan Pérez (bass, vocals), Amadeo Flores (vocals, *bajo sexto*), Tony Chávez (vocals), and Isidro López (vocals). De la Rosa first signed with Rio Records, founded by Hymie Wolf, but eventually moved to Ideal Records, which would become one of the most influential Tejano record labels of the twentieth century. Founded in 1946 by Armando Marroquín of Alice, Texas, Ideal Records helped catapult De la Rosa to regional fame.

During his career, De la Rosa introduced several important innovations into *conjunto* music, including the use of electric guitars and bass and the practice of slowing polka tempos down to 110-115 beats per minute, as opposed to the faster traditional polka tempo of 130-145 beats per minute. He also is credited with introducing a new dance step known as *el tacuachito* (“the possum”), which was very popular during the 1950s. Throughout his career, De la Rosa made more than 100 records and had numerous hits, including “Atotonilco,” “Grulla,” “Frijoles Bailan,” “Sube y Baja,” “Carmela,” “Paloma Sin Nido,” and “Cualquiera.”

In 1982, De la Rosa was inducted into the Tejano Conjunto Hall of Fame, and in 1998, the National Endowment for the Arts presented him with a National Heritage Fellowship Award, considered to be one of the highest honors given to a cultural artist. De la Rosa also received recognition from other organizations, including induction into the Hispanic American Entertainment/Pura Vida Hall of Fame in San Antonio, Texas.

On June 2, 2004, De la Rosa died at the age of 72 during heart surgery in Corpus Christi, Texas. He is survived by his wife, Lucia, three sons, Tony, Jr., Joe, and Rene, a daughter, Pamela Ann Alaniz, two stepsons, Harry Sanchez, Jr., and Raul Sanchez, three brothers, Luis, Adán, and Alfredo de la Rosa, five sisters, Elida Ruíz, Emma Prado, Herlinda San Miguel, and Evangelina and Juanita de la Rosa, nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Ray Cano, Jr