

“Partners”—Flaco Jiménez (1992)

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Essay by Erin Bauer (guest post)*



Flaco Jimenez

Although Texas-Mexican accordion music, called *conjunto*, has served as a popular and culturally significant art form across South Texas (and in northern Mexico in the related style of *norteño*) since the early 20th century, its acknowledgement among the mainstream popular music industry has emerged only relatively recently in the hybrid works of Flaco Jiménez. Born into a prominent conjunto family in San Antonio in 1939, Leonardo “Flaco” Jiménez achieved mainstream prominence through his musical collaborations with artists like Ry Cooder, Dwight Yoakam, and the Rolling Stones beginning in the 1970s and reaching a peak in the 1990s, as demonstrated in the artist’s first major-label album, “Partners” (Warner Brothers Records, 1992).

Translated from the Spanish as simply “ensemble” music, Texas-Mexican conjunto traditionally employs a standard quartet of button accordion, *bajo sexto* (a 12-string Mexican bass guitar), electric bass (previously a *tololoche*, a Mexican upright bass), and drum set in an amalgamation of German polka music, Mexican musical traits, and—increasingly—a range of Latin American and US-based styles. As hypothesized by Manuel Peña, the genre has historically served as a symbol of cultural identity among the rural, working-class Texas-Mexican population. This is the context in which Flaco began playing conjunto alongside his grandfather, Patricio, father, Santiago Sr., and brother Santiago Jr. (among other family members). In this regard, a conservative style and reliance on historical repertory serve as symbolic connections to the community, and many musicians and audiences remain reluctant to embrace changes to tradition.

Growing up in San Antonio surrounded by a kaleidoscope of folkloric and more commercialized musical styles, Flaco notes that he was interested in a range of music from a young age, gradually incorporating these disparate sounds into his own interpretations of conjunto. This diversity of interest and willingness to pursue culturally external collaborations led to Flaco’s work with Cooder during the 1970s, which ultimately led to additional collaborations and more mainstream recognition by the 1980s and 1990s. As Cooder explains, Flaco “was the one guy who seemed interested in people outside his own realm, and looked out on the horizon and saw other things worth doing.”¹ Yet, Flaco’s reliance on prominent Anglo-American musicians to

¹ Ramiro Burr, “Two Paths, One Music: San Antonio’s Jimenez Brothers Carry on Conjunto’s Traditions, Each in his Own Way.” *San Antonio Express-News*, April 25, 1999.

achieve commercial success speaks to the inherent cultural biases of the music industry, as analyzed in depth elsewhere (c.f. Bauer, “Flaco’s Legacy: The Globalization of Conjunto”). “Partners” provides a key representation of Flaco’s hybridized style, his collaborative work with popular artists, and the accommodations required for the Texas-Mexican tradition to gain a foothold in the mainstream.

Released by Warner Brothers Records in 1992, “Partners” consists of a series of 11 duets with US American commercial recording artists--each otherwise affiliated with a rock/country style. Flaco plays accordion throughout, demonstrating his usual avenue of collaboration across similar musical pursuits. As Flaco explains, the concept for the album was conceived by the record company, with individual songs chosen by the participating artists and interpreted stylistically by the Texan himself: “As for the record, I chose the traditional songs I sing. For the artists that participated, I gave them the freedom to choose the material individually. Then I put my own touch on the songs.”² While Flaco hoped that the album would facilitate a crossover into mainstream success, it still received the most recognition on the “Billboard” charts as “Regional Mexican.” As such, the album depicts a key difficulty in promoting popular recognition of niche musics: that of restrictive industry and audience categorization of culturally-connected artforms amid a general impulse to tie genre to identity. In short, Flaco’s identity as Texas Mexican has often limited the interpretation of his music to characterization as “Mexican,” despite hybridized musical traits, his positionality within the United States, and his own desire to be characterized as “American.”

The 11 tracks on “Partners” span a range of musical genres and participating artists. The four “solo” tracks on the album--“Marina,” “Me Esta Matando (Plegaria Vallenata),” “La Golondrina,” and “Eres Un Encanto”--showcase “classic” conjunto songs performed with a traditional instrumentation (in addition to alto saxophone on two pieces, as more typically seen in Mexican norteño music and the more commercialized Tejano genre) and Flaco on vocals on all but the all-instrumental “La Golondrina.” As common to the conjunto tradition, these four selections represent disparate origins across Italy, Colombia, Mexico, and Texas, respectively.

The collaborative selections on the album then link closely to each associated “partner,” with the classic sounds of accordion and bajo sexto simultaneously connecting each song to the Texas-Mexican tradition. Stephen Stills contributes his own “Change Partners,” including Yoakam, Emmylou Harris, Harry Stinson, and Holly Dunn on backing vocals and accompanied by Flaco’s standard ensemble with the added country-western strains of steel guitar. Yoakam then provides lead vocals on Warren Zevon’s “Carmelita.” Rondstadt stays a little closer to a conjunto sound with the *ranchera*, “El Puente Roto,” while John Hiatt partners with Cooder to present “Across the Borderline,” originally written (by Hiatt and Cooder) for Freddy Fender, another musician closely associated with both South Texas and Flaco through his work on the hybrid supergroup, Texas Tornados. David Hidalgo and Conrad Lozano of Los Lobos next join with Cooder for a cover of the Jimmy Lewis song, “The Girls from Texas,” followed by another nod to Flaco’s home state in Butch Hancock’s “West Texas Waltz,” performed here by Harris and Dunn. The album concludes with a conjunto-inflected version of Los Lobos’s “Don’t Worry Baby.” These

² John Lannert, “Rock/Country Acts ‘Partner’ up with Jimenez on Tex-Mex Set,” *Billboard*, September 5, 1992.

diverse selections connect the Texas-Mexican tradition to more commercialized practices, demonstrating stylistic correspondence between seemingly disparate traditions and suggesting a place for the associated community among the mainstream, despite cultural markers of language and instrumentation. Through these collaborations, Flaco presents himself--music and identity--as “country.”

“Partners” is just one of a number of cross-cultural collaborations pursued by the Texas-Mexican accordionist across his lengthy career. It rides a line between genres that have been considered separately by local audiences and the commercial music industry. This generic separation mimics a distinction between different cultural backgrounds in US American society. While Flaco’s music does not erase these boundaries, it raises interesting considerations of identity-based characterizations in art and beyond. It works to bridge ethnic separations through music.

Erin E. Bauer is an associate professor of musicology and chair of the music and art departments at Muskingum University. She is the author of “Flaco’s Legacy: The Globalization of Conjunto” (University of Illinois Press, 2023).

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