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Sing Out!

THE FOLK SONG MAGAZINE

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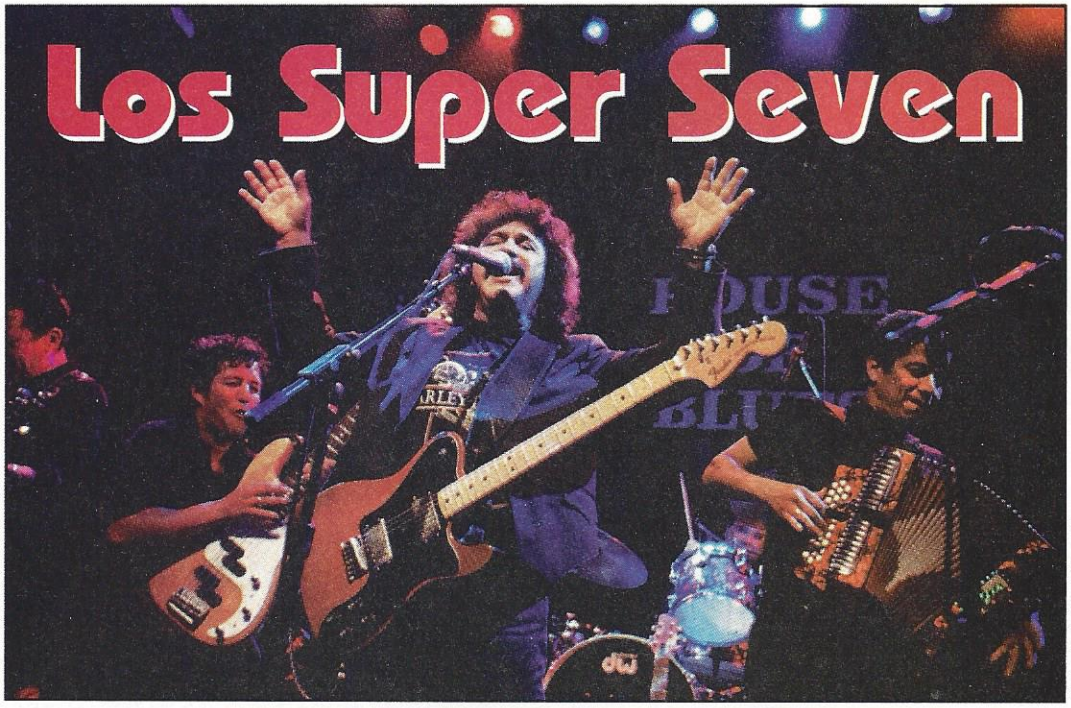


Photo by Jeffrey Mayer ©

Revisit Their Mexican Musical Roots

By Dan Durchholz

It's a damp, chilly March evening in Austin, Texas, but in the back courtyard of the tiny eatery Las Manitas, things are just starting to heat up. About a hundred invited guests are crowded on low-slung bench seats before a makeshift stage that is filled beyond capacity with musicians. There's Tex-Mex legend Freddy Fender, playing his guitar through a tiny battery-powered Pignose amp; fiery roots rocker Joe Ely, whose skyscraping hairdo should require a building permit; singer-songwriter Rosie Flores, foxy as ever in her cowgirl getup; country singer Rick Treviño, looking laid-back in his black hat and jeans, and Tejano star Ruben Ramos, "El Gato Negro," resplendent in a black suit, purple silk shirt, and shades. Behind them, accordionist Joel Guzman and his band, Los Aztecs, plus occasional guests such as flamenco guitarist Teye, provide support as hot as the tamales and chile con queso being served in the kitchen. All the makings are here for a perfect evening of Tex-Mex tunes, food, and fun.

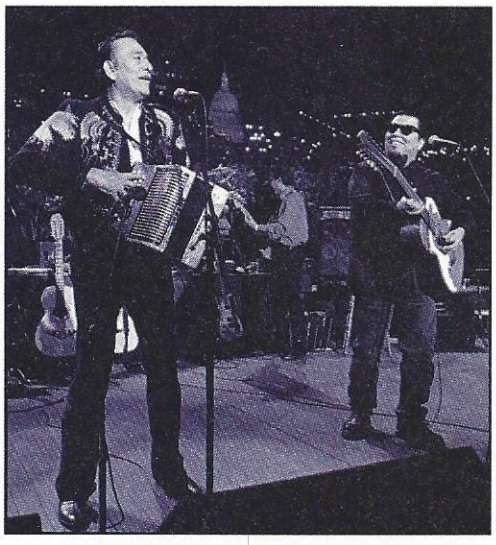


Photo by Scott Newton ©

(Above) Freddy Fender, flanked by other members of Los Super Seven and collaborators at a 1998 performance at the House of Blues in Los Angeles. (Left) The group participated in an *Austin City Limits* "Mexican Roots Music Celebration" which aired on PBS last March. Flaco Jimenez and Cesar Rosas are in the foreground.

And that's just the way it unfolds. Treviño kicks off "Río de Tenampa," a song he performed with its author, Los Lobos guitarist/vocalist David Hidalgo, on *Los Super Seven*, the Grammy winning album featuring most of the musicians present at Las Manitas. Midway through the song, Ely steps to the mike and takes over for a verse before ceding the song back to Treviño. It's that sort of night, where the mood is casual, the vocal chores are shared, and the star of the show is the songs, not the singers.

Fender steps to the mike to sing a gorgeous rendition of the dramatic "Piensa En Mí," after which he comments, "That was a song from the '30s and '40s. That was the

beautiful music they had back then. They were grooving then, too." Ely adds a touch of sobriety to the evening with a reading of Woody Guthrie's "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)," which portrays the sad experience of all too many Hispanics in America – that of the illegal migrant worker whose life and death go all but unremarked upon, except in sad ballads like this one. Flores sings a bilingual version of "Love Me Tender" with Fender, as Treviño kneels before them holding Flores' handwritten translation of the lyrics. Treviño then gets the chance to fulfill a long-standing dream – that of singing "Before the Next Teardrop Falls" with Fender, who made the song a classic a quarter century ago.

Ramos gets the house jumping again with a rhapsodic version of "La Morena," trading call-and-response vocals with Guzman and the members of Los Aztecs. Ely takes the crowd even higher with "Gallo del Cielo," perhaps the hardest rocking song ever written about a fighting cock. It's Treviño who brings the night to a climax, though, as the other musicians leave the stage and he is joined by Campanas de America, a 12-piece mariachi outfit, dressed in full regalia, that accompanies him on a lush version of "Mi Ranchito." Before they're finished, the sky opens up and the heavens tattoo their approval on the plastic roof above. It's an unsettling, but appropriately loud ovation for a stunning performance.

It was just this sort of night two years ago at the same restaurant that gave birth to Los Super Seven, which, in addition to Fender, Treviño, Ely, and Ramos (with Guzman and Campanas de America in supporting roles), includes Hidalgo, his Los Lobos compadre Cesar Rosas, and accordion great Flaco Jimenez. The album was the brain child of Dan Goodman, who is Treviño's manager, and executive producer of *Los Super Seven*.

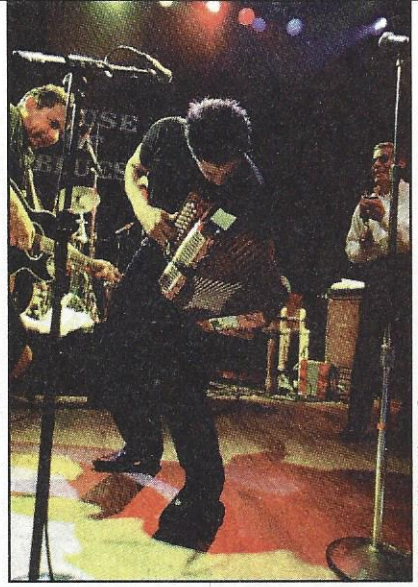


Photo by Jeffrey Mayer ©

"We wanted to put on a show of diverse musicians playing Tex-Mex music, and from there it inspired me to put a recording project together," Goodman says. "As it grew, we kind of got away from Tex-Mex and it got into more of a border-music thing, and other styles of music from throughout Mexico."

In putting the group together, Goodman says, his idea was to combine musicians of different styles, ages, and sensibilities. "Freddy and Flaco represented the Tex-Mex side of things," he says. "With David and Cesar, I just wanted to get players that had a more eclectic approach to the music. Joe Ely – well, we needed a token gringo *[laughs]*, but one who was very influenced by border sounds. Rick Treviño sort of represented the younger generation of Mexican-Americans who had basically assimilated, and this was almost a return to roots for him. So we really had three generations, which is something we wanted to accomplish – Freddy, Flaco, and Ruben are all in their early 60s; Joe, Dave, and Cesar are in their mid-40s; and Rick's in his late 20s."

"It was a real fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants project," Goodman says. "We didn't have any planning or pre-production to speak of. We just had everybody show up at the studio. As good as the album turned out, it could have just as easily been that bad." *[laughs]*

Instead of extensive planning, Goodman and a friend holed up in a San Antonio hotel room, making regular trips out to vintage Hispanic record stores such as El Noreño, where they'd gather material for a compilation tape of songs to present to the band. According to Goodman, six or seven of the songs on the finished album were from that compilation tape. The rest were brought in by the players. Through it all, though, Goodman

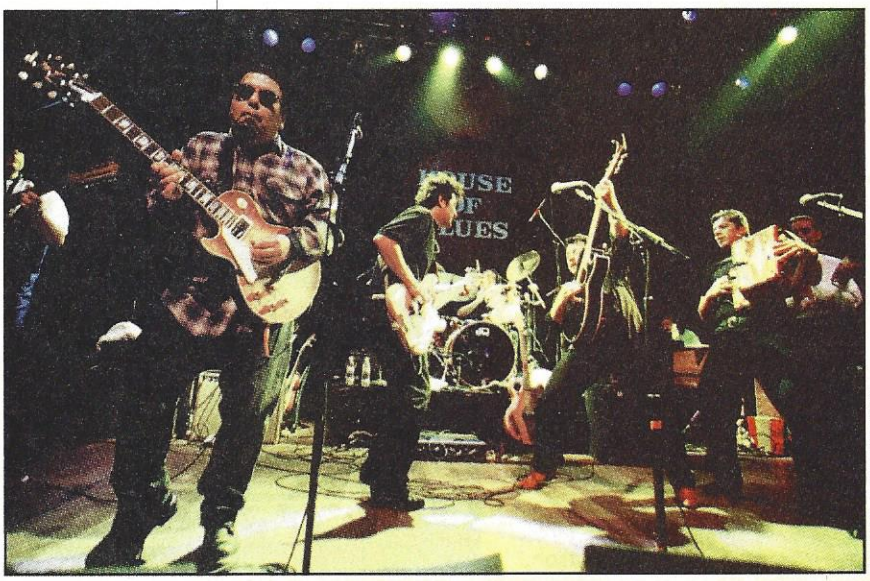


Photo by Jeffrey Mayer ©

(Above) Joe Ely on guitar and Ruben Ramos accompany accordionist Joel Guzman (foreground) as he rips out a spirited tune at the House of Blues in Los Angeles. (Right) Los Lobos member Cesar Rosas (foreground) and his fellow members of Los Super Seven, along with others, continue their fiery performance as Joe Ely shows off at the mike.

and the members of Los Super Seven kept a particular goal in mind. "We wanted to make an album that was going to introduce the Anglos to this music ... that a wide audience would relate to it," Goodman says. "Above all, we wanted a record that would break the language barrier."

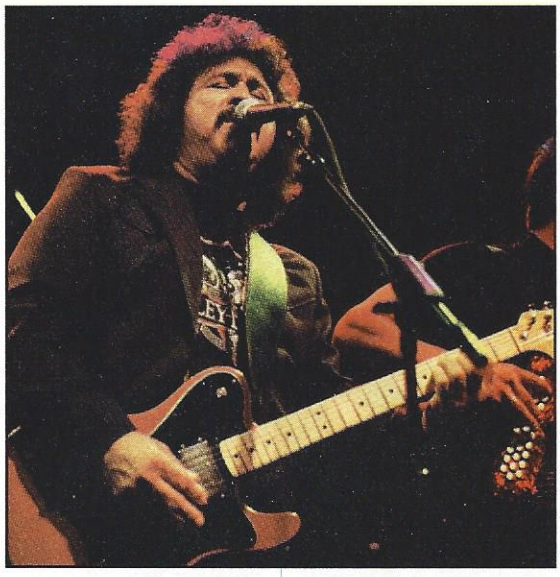


Photo by Jeffrey Mayer ©

Freddy Fender

Freddy Fender (nee Baldamar Huerta, aka the Bebop Kid) knows a thing or two about breaking language barriers. After all, it was Fender who began his career playing traditional conjunto music sung in Spanish, then switched to English in the late '50s, performing songs such as "Holy One" and the nationwide hit, "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights." In addition, it was Fender that introduced much of the Hispanic world to rock and roll, translating songs by Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and Little Richard into Spanish. "'I Hear You Knocking,' 'Blue Suede Shoes,' 'Corrina, Corrina' – I covered what I liked," Fender says today, adding with pride, "the great thing was, I was the only one doing it. No one else came up with the idea of Spanish rock and roll, covering the Anglo-American stuff."

After a stint in prison on a conviction for marijuana possession and some years of obscurity, Fender emerged as a country star in the '70s, thanks to the stirring "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," which included a verse sung in Spanish, and a remake of "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights." He was sidelined again by marital, alcohol, and drug problems, but reemerged in the '80s, clean and sober, most notably as a member of the Texas Tornados, the all-star group that also features Doug Sahm, Augie Meyers, and Flaco Jimenez.

Fender admits that his initial motivation for joining forces with Los Super Seven was more mercenary than artistic. "To be honest with you, when they first approached me, I wasn't interested in the creative end of it – I just wanted the money," he says, speaking as someone who has reason to distrust record producers making big promises. "Then when I started seeing the roster, I said, 'Wait a minute, there's something going on here, something that has a touch of roots.' I saw Flaco's name, Joe Ely – those are rootsy guys. And when I saw David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas' names on it, I became very impressed. And little Rick Treviño and Ruben Ramos. I said, 'This is challenging here.'"

"The batch of songs on that tape that we were supposed to pick from – they were so rich in traditional Mexican music. When I saw 'Piensa En Mí,' I said, 'God have mercy, that reminds me of when I was a kid, my mother used to sing that song.' I remembered a radio we had by the window, and my mother would tell us to go outside and rebury the wire, because it was a battery radio. There was a wire on a stake, and we would hit the stake and sink it into the hole some more, and we were ready for business. I said, 'I gotta do this song.' And then I had a huapango rhythm song from, I think it must be from the Spanish-American War ('Un Lunes Por La Mañana'). This old man had played that song for me one time in Matamoros, Mexico. We were drinking out there, and this guy told me about this old man in a beer joint, that he plays a beautiful guitar and sings. Sure enough. I was about 20, and he was 70-something, and he sat down and played it. I made him write it out for me, but I never played it again. But when this project came up, it was right there as clear as a bell in my mind. It makes you realize how little you know about yourself."

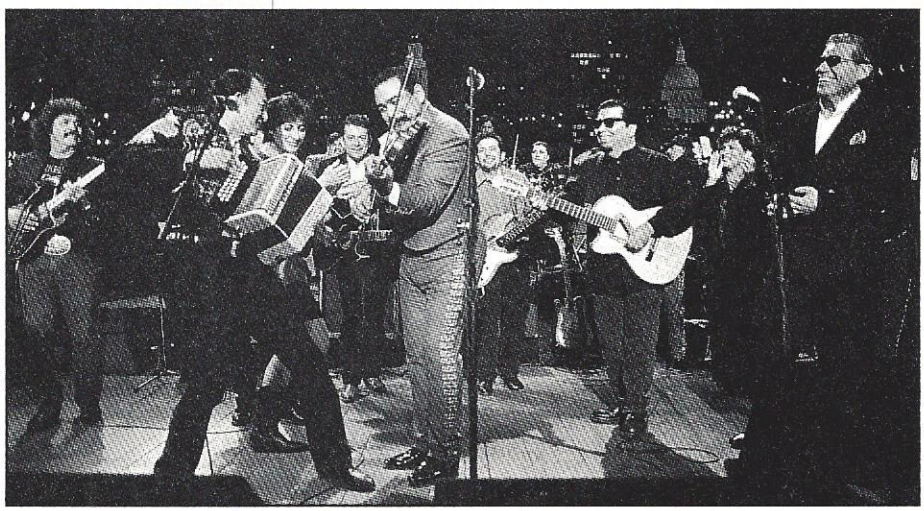


Photo by Scott Newton ©

Fender (at left) and Los Super Seven appeared with Tish Hinojosa and Companas de America at the *Austin City Limits* "Mexican Roots Music Celebration."

Fender says that he insisted on recording a song for the project that reminded him of his childhood, and especially of his mother, "because she passed away, and like everybody whose parents passed away, I miss her a lot. I guess doing 'Piensa en Mí' was my way of trying to get her back. Lydia Mendoza (whose arrangement Los Super Seven adopts on the album) sang in the same style as my mother sang in our house, and I said, 'I want to be reminded of my mother every time I hear this song.'"

Growing up in small-town Texas, Fender says he was initially inspired by cowboy singers from movies of the '40s and '50s, such as Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete. He also loved Luis Aguilar, and Pedro Vargas, a great tenor. On the female side, there was Toña La Negre, a Veracruzan congera singer, and Augustin Lara, who wrote "Granada." "All these people were influential on what you have today," Fender says. He also learned the styles particular to various regions in Mexico, such as the huapango rhythm that is used throughout the country, but is most often thought of in relation to the Eastern seaboard, "all the way down to Veracruz and Yucatan, where you will find these people who also utilize the harp," he says. "They dress in white, and they have a little bitty hat on and a red handkerchief or whatever – very simple people. But they're the ones who came up with the original 'La Bamba.'"

"Further inland, you have huapango which is more from the Mexican cowboy. And they play a type of huapango called huasteca, which means 'west.' There's a different culture, different way of dressing, and a different music, though the rhythm is the same. But the thing is, huasteca uses a lot of minor chords instead of major chords on the guitar."

Also explored on *Los Super Seven* are selections featuring accordion and bajo sexto, which Fender calls "a very rambunctious bass-like instrument that has been used to back up accordion players since the beginning of the 1900s. The accordion was brought in by the Germans, by Ukrainians, Czechs, Polish, and Bohemians in the years after the Alamo. These people introduced the accordion, and somewhere the bajo sexto came in, and it became traditional

Mexican music. The ranchera originated from the guitar, went into the mariachis, and then the accordion and bajo sexto players took those songs and made it part of their repertoire. Later they added bass and drums to those songs."

Fender says that working with Los Super Seven has given him a chance to reflect on his past, before he discovered rock and roll or R&B, and when times were hard, but much simpler. "The thing about these songs is that they all derive from the common people. It's relative to the simplicity of life as it was back then. We didn't have any television, and 90 percent of the people didn't have a radio. So these were stories that were going from mouth to mouth, from people who worked in the fields to the ones that loaded the wagons. Like the song 'El Canoero,' it's about a guy who has a canoe, and he uses his oars to row around, and he's looking for his loved one. He's got a girlfriend somewhere and he sees her footprints. He's about to catch up with her, but can't find her. The song talks about how it's dangerous for him to row there – 'Canoer, canoer, you're gonna get killed.' It's very simple, but it's exciting."

"Doing this album was an opportunity to dig up some of these treasures that were dropped in the ground and the time has covered them. We have brought some of them out of oblivion. What we did was, we saved some treasures from being lost."

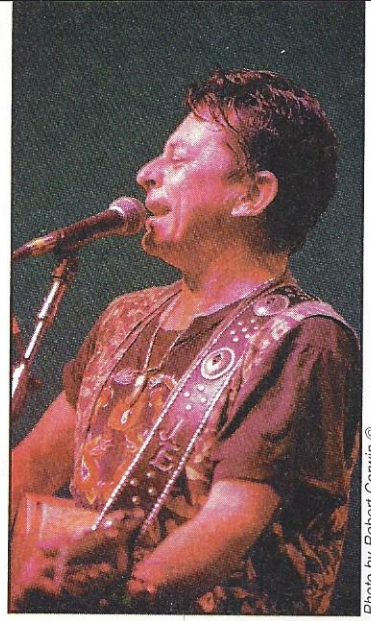
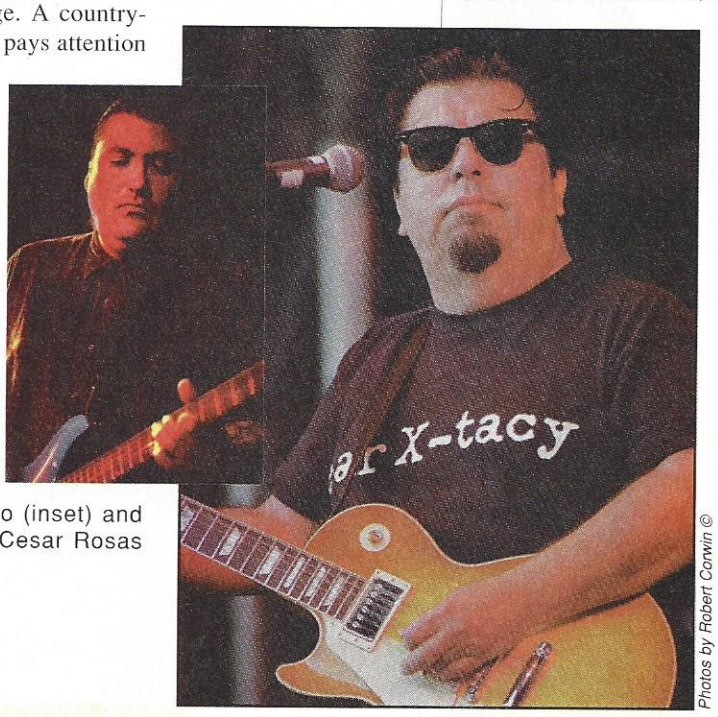


Photo by Robert Corwin ©

Joe Ely

Los Super Seven's resident gringo, Joe Ely has never achieved a level of fame that matches the excitement he can generate onstage. A country-rocker whose music pays attention to both sides of that equation, Ely has played with friends Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock in the ill-fated yet visionary group the Flatlanders, and toured as a solo act with the Clash. Ely grew up in the West Texas outpost of Lubbock, where he sang gospel music in the church choir and struggled to learn the fiddle, but was transfixed by rock and roll thanks to Jerry Lee Lewis, whom Ely saw play on the back of a flatbed truck at a local Pontiac dealership, and to local hero Buddy Holly, who turned every self-respecting Lubbock teen into an aspiring guitarist.

Yet other musical influences had more subtle effects on Ely. "When I was growing up, my daddy had a used-clothing store in downtown Lubbock, and when I was about nine or ten years old, my daddy put me to work on the weekends, helping him out at the store," he says. "At that time, all the cotton fields around there were planted, chopped, weeded, bailed, and everything, by migrant workers. So the entire summer, the workers would come in, starting in the spring, to plant the cotton, and they'd work the fields all summer long. Lubbock was this little sleepy college town, a richland desert oasis – all of a sudden, it turned into a place with 10,000 migrant workers in it, and they'd all come into town on the weekends and buy supplies for the rest of the week. And daddy's store was a favorite place, cause they could get a 10 cent shirt and a 20 cent pair of used shoes. So I found myself kind of in the middle of all this, and it was so amazing. All the workers would come in, and they'd bring their guitars and accordions, and the streets would turn from this drab old dusty west Texas street into almost like a fiesta. There'd be music coming out of all the bars, and on the street corners, and it was just one of the most magical times in my life. That's kind of my first connection with music of the people, from the workers of Mexico coming up into west Texas."



David Hidalgo (inset) and Cesar Rosas

Photos by Robert Corwin ©

It was that experience, Ely says, that led him to choose "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)" to include on *Los Super Seven*. "Think about it: We're here in the United States, living in one of the richest and most powerful countries on earth, and there's a border separating us from one of the poorest countries on earth. And that border – I don't know of any other place on earth that has such a bizarre line drawn in the sand be-

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tween a rich, powerful nation and a very poor, humbled nation. And that has always fascinated me as I've grown up and gone down into Mexico many times. It's just such an amazing contrast that you can't even fathom it. Going right across the border from everybody driving shiny new cars to people living in carved out pieces of cactus with a piece of tin over the top of it. Their music reflects the traditions and how hard it's been for that country. Seeing this shiny glossy neighbor to the north, and getting culture from its music and TV, and then venturing across the Rio Bravo into this crazy world, and getting sucked into all the vices that there are, and falling into the holes in San Antonio and L.A. Man, I mean, the stories ... There's no other place like that on earth."

> "Doing this album was an opportunity to dig up some of these treasures that were dropped in the ground and the time has covered them. We have brought some of them out of oblivion. What we did was, we saved some treasures from being lost."
>
> — *Freddy Fender*

One of the more interesting aspects of the Super Seven project is the lack of any real contrast between the approaches of the Texans in the group and the two Californians – Hidalgo and Rosas. "It's a whole different trip the way they feel about Mexican music down there," Rosas says. "California is a little more Americanized," Hidalgo adds. "The Mexican-Americans in Texas all seem to speak Spanish, and in many cases, Spanish first. I guess we're assimilated more in California."

Yet, in terms of musical experience, the two factions are remarkably similar. Like Fender and Ely, Rosas and Hidalgo heard traditional Mexican music played when they were kids, abandoned it for rock and roll, and then returned to it later. If anything, the Lobos members returned to it sooner. Los Lobos, after all, began as a group playing traditional music for weddings, or wherever they could get a gig.

"We grew up with rock and roll and all that stuff, too," Hidalgo points out. "But it wasn't until our late teens, when we were just getting out of high school that we started to appreciate the traditional stuff. Actually we started playing some of it just to fool around, almost as a joke, poking fun at it. But we couldn't play it. Cesar moved into my neighborhood, there was another guy who lived around the corner, then Louis [Perez] was there, so we'd get together and fool around. We'd try and play cumbias and things, go through Cesar's mom's record collection, and then we'd play the music and wonder, 'how'd they do that?' There was more to it than we expected."

"We were the original unplugged group," Rosas says with a laugh. "But we were doing it with a purpose. We thought the world needed this music, that it should be given a chance. We were on a mission from God." *[laughs]*

Los Super Seven came out just before a veritable deluge of Lobos-related material. Hidalgo recently released two side projects: Houndog, a minimalist-blues group he leads with ex-Canned Heat guitarist Mike Halby, and Latin Playboys, his group with Lobos drummer Perez and producers Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake. Their second album is wryly dubbed *Dose*. Rosas just released his debut solo album, *Soul Disguise*, and there's also a new Lobos record in the works (on a new label, no less) for summer release. "The fact that we were shopping for a new label just made it easier to do all these side projects now," Hidalgo says. "We didn't have to answer to anyone about them."

Hidalgo and Rosas each wrote a song for the Super Seven record, and played on the traditional tunes as well. Rosas contributed "Un Beso al Viento," and shares vocals with Ramos on "El Canoero" and Jimenez on "Margarita."

"I couldn't do a song for this without having Flaco play on it," Rosas says. "He's my mentor, among all the accordion players."

Hidalgo wrote "Río de Tenampa" with Lobos writing partner Perez for the album, and arranged "La Sirena," a traditional tune about the mermaids of myth. "I have this old record of that song, it's in the huasteca style," Hidalgo says. "I always loved that song. Everybody brought something to the table that they wanted to do; an old favorite or something they thought that was good. 'La Sirena' is one of my favorite songs. I always wanted to record it."

(L to R) RickTreviño, Flaco Jimenez and Ruben Ramos.

Photo by Chris Strachwitz ©

A Selected "Los Super Seven: Roots & Branches" Discography

★ **Los Super Seven:**
Los Super Seven, 1998, RCA #67689

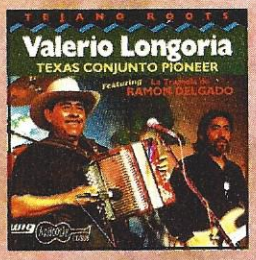
★ **Los Lobos** (Hidalgo & Rosas w/Steve Berlin, Conrad Lozano & Louie Perez):
La Pistola Y El Corazon, 1988, Slash/Warner Bros. #25790
Just Another Band From East L.A.: *A Collection*, 1993, Slash/Warner Bros. #45367
Soul Disguise (Rojas), 1999, Rykodisc #10459
Latin Playboys (Hidalgo w/Prez, Mitchell Froom & Tchad Blake), 1994, Slash/Warner Bros. #45543

★ **Flaco Jimenez:**
Flaco's First, 1995 (orig. 1956-58), Arhoolie #370
Un Mojado Sin Licencia, 1993 (orig. 1960s), Arhoolie # 396
Partners (duets with guests), 1992, Reprise #26822
Ay Te Dejo En San Antonia Y Mas!, 1990 (orig. 1985), Arhoolie #318

★ **Freddy Fender**
The Best of Freddy Fender, 1996, MCA #835
Conciones De Mi Barrio, 1993, Arhoolie #366

★ **The Texas Tornados** (Fender & Jimenez w/Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers):
Best of Texas Tornados, 1994, Reprise #45511

★ **Joe Ely:**
Twistin' in the Wind, 1998, MCA #70031
Honky Tonk Masquerade, 1978, MCA #10220



★ **Ruben Ramos:**
Tejanisimo, 1998, Sony Discos #82841
20 De Coleccion, 1994 (compilation), Sony Discos #81389

★ **Rick Treviño:**
El Corazon De Rick Treviño, 1999, Sony Discos #82987
The Best of Rick Treviño, 1997 (compilation), Sony Discos #82420

The executive producer for the Los Super Seven project, Dan Goodman, is holding his exact sources for the material on the disc close to his vest, looking toward mining the same vein for future projects. Still, there is a vast amount of phenomenal Mexican-American roots material readily available, thanks largely to the incredible dedication of the fine folks at Arhoolie Records. Here is a brief primer of some recordings by the original source artists for this music:

★ **Compilations:**
15 Early Tejano Classics, 1997, Arhoolie #109
15 Tex-Mex Conjunto Classics, 1996, Arhoolie #104
Tejano Roots: The Women, 1991, Arhoolie #343
Tejano Roots, 1991, Arhoolie #341

There was also a great 24-release series entitled *Texas-Mexican Border Music* that was released by Folklyric, an imprint label for Arhoolie. Most of it is available on cassette, and a few of the LPs have been combined and released on CD. Check with Arhoolie for details.

★ **Lydia Mendoza:**
Vida Mia: 1934-39, 1999, Arhoolie #7008
First Queen of Tejano Music, 1996 (orig. 1950-64), Arhoolie #392
La Gloria de Texas, 1993 (orig. 1979), Arhoolie #3012
"Mal Hombre" and Other Original Hits from the 1930s, 1992, Arhoolie #7002

Lydia's sisters (Juanita & María) recorded as well. A fine compilation of their work is also available: *Las Hermanas Mendoza*, 1995 (orig. 1946-52), Arhoolie #430

★ **Valerio Longoria:**
Texas Conjunto Pioneer, 1993 (orig 1951-90), Arhoolie #358
Caballo Viejo, 1990, Arhoolie #336

★ **Other Conjunto/Tejano Pioneers:**
Don Santiago Jimenez, *His First and Last Recordings: 1937 & 1979*, 1994, Arhoolie #414
Narciso Martinez, *Father of the Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 1993, Arhoolie #361

Sources:

Arhoolie, 10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530; Ph: 888-274-6654; Internet: www.arhoolie.com.

The other recordings are all on "major" labels that don't seem to be able to work directly with the public. Try your local record shop or one of the great mail order resources that advertise in these pages!

In terms of wish fulfillment, however, it'd be difficult to top the effect of *Los Super Seven* on Rick Treviño. Raised in a house filled with Mexican music, thanks to his father, a former professional musician, Treviño rejected his parents music for straight-ahead country music. He prevailed, however, and became one of Nashville's hot new "hat acts." Eventually, Treviño gained an appreciation for his roots, and the guitar pulls at Las Manitas, and eventually the Super Seven project allowed him to explore that part of his personality and artistry.

Treviño describes his early reaction to Mexican music as almost entirely negative. "After my dad quit playing music and took a daytime job, I could always tell, even though I was very young, that he was very sentimental about that kind of music," he says. "When he listened to music, I think it reminded him of his life and the good times and a lot of bad times. So when he would listen to Tejano music, for me, it would bring on very negative feelings. I didn't like hearing it. He would pull out his own albums, or even Ruben Ramos' albums, put them on