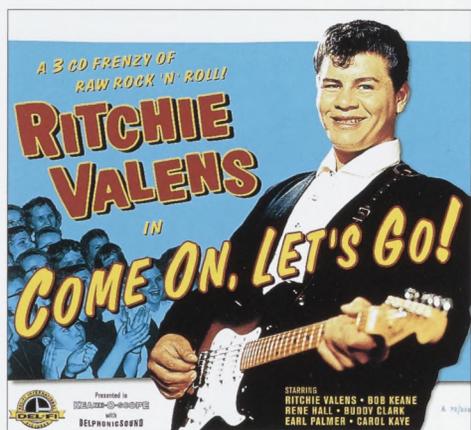


ritchie valens

By
Lenny
Kaye

performers



IN DECEMBER 1958, Ritchie Valens paid a visit to his alma mater, Pacoima Junior High School, in the San Fernando Valley of Southern California. Not much older than the assembled students (he had turned seventeen the previous May 13), he performed an assortment of hits, his own and others', including his latest single, the double-sided "Donna"/"La Bamba," which would climb into the Top Five by the following February.

RICHARD STEPHEN VALENZUELA was among the first generation of rock & rollers to have his path inscribed by the music itself, rather than its roots and tributaries. Although he had learned Spanish songs on the secondhand Sears guitar he had refinished in wood shop at Pacoima and had been playing professionally for a little over a year, his listening experience hardly predated the music's birth. As a consequence, he got his nickname - "Little Ritchie" - from the influence of Little Richard, his singing style from Fats Domino and Buddy Holly, his reverberated guitar from the nascent surf rhythms that were even then pounding the shores of California.

The Pacoima students saw him as one of their own, though Valens had just returned from a Hawaiian tour and would be traveling to the East Coast later that month to appear on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* and Alan Freed's *Jubilee of Stars* at the Loew's State on Times Square. Ritchie spoke their language - not just *Spanglish*, but the secret password that is rock & roll.

He caught his audience's yearning, channeling it into passionate singing and a "crying guitar" (as one early poster advertised), soon coming to the attention of producer Bob Keane. A former clarinet player for Artie Shaw who had struck gold with Sam Cooke's first secular recordings, Keane worked with Ritchie at L.A.'s Gold Star Studios to craft a sound (and a foreshortened name). By the early fall of 1958, Valens's composition of "Come On Let's Go" had broken nationwide on Keane's Del-Fi label. The song's combination of restless impatience and invitation proved irresistible.

Ritchie followed it up with a ladies' choice. "Donna" was written for his high school sweetheart, and it reflects as much Valens's sense of lost innocence and youth as it does the breakup of a relationship: "Where can you be?" The song, a classic slow-dancer, was popularized by disc jockeys with an eye to record hops. "Donna" was backed by a revved-up version of a Mexican wedding favorite (Keane had heard Ritchie singing "La Bamba" in the backseat of his car one day), and the future looked bright indeed for a boy who still remembered the cramped poverty of his youth. He bought his mother a pink stucco house in Pacoima before setting out for the East and the Winter Dance Party Tour, scheduled to begin in Milwaukee on January 23, 1959.

He would never return. Ritchie was so unprepared for the frigid winter of the upper Midwest that he neglected to bring a heavy jacket and had to have one specially shipped. On February 3, 1959, the small plane in which he was riding with Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper cartwheeled into an Iowa cornfield, taking with it an artist who was just beginning to find his individual voice.

We remember him today as one of the first rock & rollers to embrace his Latin heritage, to embody the music's rags-to-Ritchie dreams.

"I can't hear what I'm singing," says Valens, off mike, at the Pacoima concert. No matter; others always will. ●



uno,
dos,
tres,
cuatro

tex-
mex
blasts
off

By Joe
Nick
Patoski

“UNO, DOS, ONE, TWO, TRES, CUATRO”: That count-off introduction that forever etched Sam Samudio into the institutional memory of pop as Sam the Sham – the turbaned hepcat who led his Pharaohs out of the east Dallas barrio to the big time – holds the key to understanding Tex-Mex and its place in the cosmos of all things rock & roll. The rest of the modern world may have perceived the bilingual enumeration as some kind of exotic confection, an unconventional begin-



ning to a giddy rhythm ride of insane craziness. For Samudio, though, screaming “uno, dos, one, two” was just doing what came naturally to a teenager growing up in two cultures in a place not far from the Rio Grande, where the First World meets the Third World and where the Tex meets the Mex.



The emergence of these artists coincided with gringos in Texas soaking up Mexican sounds and selling them to their audiences, such as Western swing's Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, who added standards such as "El Rancho Grande" and "Jalisco" to their dance card. This ongoing tradition of borrowing and reinventing also includes story songs, or *corridos*, of Mexican *guitarreros*, which inspired modern cowboy music and gave Marty Robbins something to croon about in "Streets of Laredo" and "El Paso."

It took rock & roll to give Tex-Mex real currency, though. From the Tex perspective, Buddy Holly's distinctive vaquero lilt epitomized by "Heartbeat" and "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" – a styling later recaptured by El Paso's Bobby Fuller Four on "I Fought the Law" – and the saucy, hip-shaking beat of "Tequila" by the Champs, an instrumental trio of white boys from Abilene, Texas, blazed the trail. The Mex half of the equation was articulated by Ritchie



IT HAS BEEN an ongoing process since Germans and Bohemians bearing accordions arrived in the Texas-Mexico borderlands fresh off the boat as early as the 1870s. Their traditions and instruments were quickly embraced by Mexican-Texans, or Tejanos, who picked up the squeeze-box and incorporated polkas, waltzes, the schottische and the redowa into their dance repertoires alongside rancheras, boleros and huapangos.

Valens, the pride and joy of East Los Angeles, who took a *son jarocho* classic from Vera Cruz, Mexico, called "La Bamba" and revved and twanged it up into something new and completely different. Valens had just asked Holly to produce his next record when both artists were tragically killed.

Before Valens stormed onto the charts, though, a handsome young man named Baldemar Huerta, performing under the name Freddy Fender, was already honing a reputation in the Rio Grande Valley as the Tex-Mex Elvis. Fender, also known as El Bebop Kid, played to his audience by singing rock & roll and blues in Spanish and English and broke into the mainstream with his 1959 Top Forty hit, "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights," a guaranteed dance-floor belly-rubber sung in English.

The diatonic-button accordion and bajo sexto to twelve-string guitar, which provided the bass lines and was imported from the Mexican interior, became the cornerstones of sound known as *norteño* in northern Mexico, and *conjunto* on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. Its pioneers, who enjoyed significant record sales beginning in the 1930s, included: accordionists Bruno Villarreal; Valerio Longoria; Santiago Jiménez and Narciso Martínez ("El Huracán del Valle"), whose polkas were also marketed to Bohemians under the pseudonym Polski Kwartet and to Cajuns as Louisiana Pete. Lydia Mendoza, "La Alondra de la Frontera" (the Lark of the Border), became the first Tejano singing star with a string of hit recordings (including her sizzling put-down of bad men, "Mal Hombre") that sold across the United States and Latin America.





In fact, Mexican-Americans all over Texas were doing their own interpretations of rock & roll, filtering it through an ethnic gauze that rendered the music slower and more rhythm heavy, swaying and braying with backbeats that accentuated hip shaking, and framed around a singer voicing sentiments forever sincere, my dearest darling, *con cariño*. As with all early variations of rock, black music provided the strongest influences – blues, R&B, doo-wop, soul – and Tex-Mex threw those sounds back into the mainstream simmered in spices and salsa. Groups from San Antonio's El West Side, such as Sonny Ace y los Twisters and Charlie and the Jives, were just as fluent in Louis Prima, and just as prone to cover Bobby Bland and Junior Parker as their white and black compadres. Meanwhile, doo-wop was the bread and butter of the Royal Jesters, Los Dinos, and Rudy and the Reno Bops. All were regional stars thanks to thriving recording scenes in San Antonio, Corpus Christi and the Rio Grande Valley and radio shows like San Antonio's Joe Anthony's Harlem Hit Parade, which devoted heavy airplay to South Texas acts. Their success proved that Mexican-Americans were crazy about rock & roll, as the music began its conquest of world cultures and languages to become the first global music.

San Antonio's Sunny and the Sunliners became the first Mexican-American group from Texas to earn an appearance on *American Bandstand*, with their 1963 hit "Talk to Me," on which vocalist Sunny Ozuna emulated R&B singer Lit-

tle Willie John. Ozuna's previous group, the Sunglows, had enjoyed some notoriety for their peppy instrumental polka "Peanuts," which was the Chicano answer to the Bill Doggett Combo's rhythm & blues stroll "Honky Tonk (Part Two)," cowritten by Clifford Scott, the San Antonio saxophonist in Doggett's band who unwittingly influenced the Tex-Mex horn sound.

In the mid-Sixties, the same British Invasion that put a damper on many regional styles of American music launched Tex-Mex into international prominence, led by Sam the Sham's "Wooly Bully" in 1964 and followed by "96 Tears" by ? and the Mysterians, a band of Mexican-American teens from Michigan with deep family roots in Texas. Both songs shared more than a few dynamic similarities to such British bands as Manfred Mann and the Zombies.

Sometimes the influence was more subtle, as has been the case with ZZ Top, who paid tribute to Tex-Mex with "Heard It on the X" and "Mexican Blackbird," toured with a mariachi as an opening act, donned sombreros on album covers and wore their hearts on their sleeves, down to the fold-out photograph of the Tex-Mex number two dinner on the inside cover of their 1973 breakout album, *Tres Hombres*.

But no other artist grasped the atmospherics of Tex-Mex quite like Doug Sahn, a white boy from San Antonio who was a child prodigy on steel guitar and whose life changed when he saw Freddy Fender perform at a San Antonio drive-in in 1958. "She's About a Mover" by

Previous: El Bebop Kid, 1959; Opposite top: The late Doug Sahn, ca. 1972; Freddy Fender (right) and pals, Phoenix, 1967; Above: Sir Douglas Quintet, 1966



Top: Flaco Jiménez in action, San Antonio, 1975; Buddy Holly, 1958; Opposite: Sam "the Sham" Samudio, 1967

Sahm's band, the Sir Douglas Quintet, was produced by Houston indie Huey P. Meaux – who'd also overseen Sunny and the Sunliners' "Talk to Me" – and bore a striking beat-on-top-of-the-beat resemblance to *Rubber Soul*-era Beatles, a connection underscored by Meaux's crafty determination to dress the group in Carnaby Street fashions and pass them off as English rather than Texan. "Just don't open your mouths," Meaux advised his clients, which they didn't until they appeared on *Hullabaloo* and blew their disguise forever. The beat on the beat may have sounded British, but any Tex-Mex aficionado could hear Augie Meyer's trademark roller-rink Vox organ for what it was – a chili-bowl synthesis of bajo sexto guitar backbeat and accordion riffing on a modified polka.

The SDQ fled Texas for the freedom of San Francisco just about the same time a Rio Grande Valley cat with an eye patch named Steve Jordan covered the Vanilla Fudge's "You Keep Me Hangin' On" with his button accordion, singing in both English and Spanish in a style identified on the 45 as "acordeón psicodélico."

Sahm returned to Texas in the early Seventies, setting up shop in Austin and paying tribute to his roots by assembling an all-star band including Meyers, saxophonist Rocky Morales and El West Side Horns. One track on his album *The Return of Doug Saldana*, "Wasted Days and Wasted

Nights," was dedicated to Freddy Fender, "whenever you are."

His followup for Atlantic, *Doug Sahm and Band*, was hyped for its superstar lineup of supporting musicians, specifically Bob Dylan. While sales were negligible, the recording was noteworthy for introducing San Antonio accordionist Flaco Jiménez to the world, and for the first time since Bill Haley and His Comets prominently featuring the much maligned instrument in a rock & roll ensemble. Jiménez's participation was not lost on musicologist Ry Cooder, who spent several months in Texas learning bajo sexto guitar, while following Jiménez to conjunto dances, then issued *Chicken Skin Music* to show what he had learned (this some twenty years before Cooder "discovered" the Buena Vista Social Club and Cuban roots music). Peter Rowan, a California folk-roots rocker, followed in Cooder's footsteps and moved to Texas, where he collaborated extensively with Jiménez.

Sahm's next album for Atlantic included an original, "Soy Chicano," that was embraced by Mexican-Americans in Texas as an anthem of brown pride. In 1974, Sir Doug's shout out to Freddy Fender led to the rediscovery of the old Tex-Mex rocker, whose career had ended when he did time in Louisiana's Angola prison for possession of two marijuana joints. Fender, who was working as a mechanic and going to nightclubs,

came out of retirement to perform in Austin with Sahm. Meaux eventually produced recordings that led to Fender's rebirth as a country-pop crooner. Topping the *Billboard* pop chart, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls" rocketed to Number One, and a reworked version of "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" went to Number Eight.

Meanwhile, Tejanos (the term most often used to describe Mexican-Texans in the wake of Chicano awareness) were incorporating elements of rock & roll into their regional style, which was aimed at Mexican-American audiences, led by Little Joe Hernández of Little Joe and the Latinaires. Hernández left Texas to do his West Coast residency in the early Seventies, emulating the Latin rock of Santana and Malo before returning to home as Little Joe y La Familia and adding salsa, rock and a raised consciousness to the Tejano mix, ultimately setting the stage for the crossover stardom of Selena in the early Nineties, before her tragic death in 1995 at the hand of her fan-club president.

On the Tex side, Sahm was followed in the Eighties by Joe "King" Carrasco's "Jalapeño con Big Red" and his punked-up version of Tex-Mex called *nuevo wavo*, Brave Combo's nuclear polka and Sahm's reborn border-wave sound. Then, on the heels of supergroups such as the Traveling Wilburys, Sahm hooked up with sidekick Augie Meyers, his mentor Freddy Fender and Flaco Jiménez to form the Texas Tornados, the Tex-Mex supergroup that racked up a couple of Grammys and the biggest chart action for Tex-Mex since the mid-Sixties.

The process of cross-border hybridization has continued unabated, with Randy Garibay's Chicano blues; the Tex-Mex ska of Plastilina Mosh from Monterrey, Mexico, and Los Skarnales from Houston; Miami's Mavericks' Latinized take on country; the South Park Mexicans' version of rap; and Los Super Seven following in the supergroup footsteps of the Texas Tornados. Flaco Jiménez has recorded with the Rolling Stones, Santana, Linda Ronstadt, Dwight Yoakam and Stephen Stills, Tex-Mexing their sounds, as it were. His most recent collaboration with country singer Buck Owens, on Jiménez's album *Sleepytown*, a cover of the Beatles' "Love Me Do," brings the Tex-Mex-British Invasion link full circle.

A bit convoluted, perhaps, but Sam Samudio can tell you, it's really all as easy as counting "one, two, tres, cuatro."



