Music Industries on the Border of Northeast Mexico and South Texas: The Case of Norteño and Tejano Conjunto

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Resumen: Cuando hablamos de "industria musical" la primera idea que viene a la mente es la venta de discos (en formato físico o digital). Sin embargo, el término es mucho más amplio: "la música ... es un sistema de objetos, una estructura de mercancías con valores simbólicos unidos a ellas." La música genera diversas empresas paralelas, que van desde la publicación de partituras y métodos, revistas especializadas y libros, películas y documentales, y muchas otras cosas. Este artículo pretende visibilizar los intercambios comerciales que genera la "otra" industria musical en ambos lados de la frontera entre el sur de Texas, en Estados Unidos de América, y los estados mexicanos de Coahuila y Tamaulipas. Basado en entrevistas etnográficas, y trabajo de campo realizado en la región, quiero mostrar que la música genera riqueza y empleos, tanto para los músicos y maestros como para los vendedores de instrumentos musicales, partituras, cuerdas, accesorios, y los especialistas en reparaciones.

Palabras clave: Industria musical, Música norteña y tejana, Instrumentos musicales, Estudios fronterizos, Estudios culturales.

Abstract: When we talk about the music industry the first idea that comes to mind is the sales of records (in physical or digital format). However, the term is much broader: "music... is a system of objects, a *structure of commodities* with symbolic values attached to them" [1] . Music generates several parallel businesses, ranging from the publication of scores and methods, specialized magazines and books, movies and documentaries, and many other things. This article aims to make visible the commercial exchanges generated by the "other" music industry on both sides of the border between Texas, in the US, and the Mexican states of Coahuila and Tamaulipas. Based on ethnographic interviews and field work carried out in the region, I demonstrate that the music industry creates wealth and jobs, both for musicians, as well as for sellers of musical instruments, scores, strings, accessories, and those in charge of making repairs.

Keywords: Music industry, Norteño & Tejano music, Musical instruments, Border studies, Cultural studies.

In the report *Information and communication technologies and cultural industries, a Latin American perspective*, published by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, United Nations regional office), Argentine economist, Jorge Katz, referred to various music industries, but did not consider the sale of instruments and accessories as a cultural industry, stating that

> The music industry is one that takes music from the first link in the production or creation chain -the author/composer- to the final consumer. This conception ranges from the music industry of live concerts, the music broadcasting industry by radio, the sheet music publishing industry and finally the record industry, which strictly speaking is the " phonograph industry" or musical recordings in any of the

> supports available, material or incorporeal. The first two are service industries, the third and fourth produce durable goods[2].

However, and due to the fact that it is an important economic agent, the cultural industries related to musical instruments was one of the topics that interested me the most in recent years, when I conducted research on Norteño and Tejano music on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States[3]. A proof of the hierarchy is the brand created by the Argentine-born musician and businessman Alberto Kreimerman, Hermes Music, which has an annual income of about $100,000,000[4]. This business, which has branch offices in Mexico and the US, is based in our region of study, and good part of its profits comes from Mexican clients.

One of the things that I observed during my early field work was the way in which economics had the ability to modify musical genres while, at the same time, these musical genres made a considerable impact on the virtuous circle of economy. I conducted interviews with musicians and record producers recognized by the canon of Norteño and Tejano genres, but the data that I would have liked to collect in music stores remained pending, especially related to the profits they produce, the sale of musical instruments, strings and accessories, sheet music, magazines and books, and a whole range of products and services associated to music making. In this article, I seek to remedy this lack of information, presenting data gathered in music houses on the border between Coahuila and Tamaulipas (in northern Mexico), and southern Texas, in the US.

Background: musical instruments and border music

In childhood memories, I remember my obsession to purchase a musical instrument, which in my case was the guitar. Despite the fact that the human voice is the first sources of sound that we frequent in life, from an early age I believed that I could not become a professional musician without playing an instrument. The day this desire came true was just the beginning of years of incessant practice. In addition to the various guitars that I have owned over the years, strings were replaced frequently and, sometimes, the instruments were in need of repair. This is relevant because I acquired my first quality guitar in South Texas, and my life story is similar to that of many other performers, regardless of the genre to which they dedicate themselves, so we can affirm that it is unlikely that any cultural music industry can exist without musical instruments. In fact, although Katz does not mention it, the first cultural industry related to our harmonious hobby is the one that builds and markets musical instruments. Due to this importance, I consider that the role of these objects has had throughout history has not been adequately highlighted: What social acceptance would popular urban music in the world will have without sound-generating artifacts? How is Norteño and Tejano conjunto immediately recognized, for example, thanks to its inseparable instruments such as the bajo sexto (a kind of Mexican double string guitar) and accordion?

To contextualize its significance, we can note that various archaeological excavations confirm that humans have made objects that produce sounds since prehistoric times: the age of some rocks that are believed to have been used as percussions is estimated at 165,000 years, while the first wind instruments (a bone flute) we know appeared more than 42,000 years ago[5]. Being a commodity ("objects of economic value"), in modern times musical instruments have many social lives, and can be part of the definition by American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai: "Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchange." He goes further, stating that in order to understand "the concrete, historical circulation of things", in this case, the concrete, historical circulation of musical instruments (and accessories), we need to "follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things... it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context"[6].

Moving on to our topic of interest: what is Norteño and Tejano music? The music of northeast Mexico —also known as *conjunto norteño,* music of accordion and bajo sexto, or the traditional *Fara-Fara*— began as an expression of the rural communities of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, which was soon assimilated into the neighboring states, including the South Texas Plains, of which American folklorist, Alan Lomax, said that, "in speech, in culture, in way of life and, most of all, in music, it is strongly Mexican"[7].

Since the end of the 19th century, the button accordion was heard in the region, and after the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) it was accompanied by the guitar or the bajo sexto. The change in the instrumentation had to do with an incipient local taste and identity, but it also occurred for economic reasons, since it was easier to pay for a duet than for the old typical bands or small orchestras[8]. I consider that the duet with bajo sexto and accordion is an adaptation that was made, with regional instruments, of the traditional duo of singers who were accompanied by guitar, quite common in Mexico and the southern United States since previous decades [9]. In Texas, Norteño music was assimilated by Mexican migrants and Tejanos in a particular way, becoming a source of ethnic pride and, among other things, we can confirm that north of the border the accordion is more participatory than in Norteño conjunto.

Like mariachi, some people have searched for a mythical French origin of Norteño music, as those who affirm that "Fara-Fara derives from the French word: *fanfare*, which means band"[10]. What we can confirm is that, in its beginnings, accordion and bajo sexto music was instrumental, and used European musical forms, such as polka and redova[11]. Initially, it was considered cantina music and the music of poor and uneducated people. Today, the use of those European musical forms has been relegated, but corridos (ballads) and songs that are part of a great international cultural industry are disseminated among all

social strata. Due to the economic influence of northeastern Mexico, and Mexican Americans, the musical instruments that represent the ensemble have been transformed from peasant to urban, from marginal to public, appearing frequently in the mass media, and crossing the boundaries of social classes[12].

In relation to the academy, after having been despised for decades, in recent years there have been various books and articles published on the history of Norteño and Tejano music. Before this boom, it was only possible to find a few monographs with a small print run that focused on certain groups or soloists, written by chroniclers from the northeast of the country. At present, both American and Mexican academics have taken advantage of the popularity of this music to foster the edition of texts that analyze its early stages, development, consolidation, globalization..., and among the elements that cause the most attention, and generate passionate controversies, are its representative musical instruments: accordion and bajo sexto, of which I will speak next.

Unfinished diary of a traveler

The interviews carried out in the US and in Mexico were conducted in Spanish, and in order to show the challenges that ethnographic work entails, I wrote this section as a diary, owing a debt to the classic *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* by Paul Rabinow[13]. During 2016, I carried out two research trips in the northeast border of Mexico and South Texas. The first began on Thursday, January 28, traveling to the town of Eagle Pass, Texas, which I took as a strategic point to visit other cities in the region. I completed field work the next day, going to the most remote village, Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila. There, I only found an old store where few musical instruments were sold, and also a good deal of Mexican handicrafts: *Curiosidades Acuña*.

Later, I crossed the border to Del Rio, Texas, where in the downtown area I could not find the establishment I was looking for, Buddy's Music, until someone told me that they had moved to the Mall del Sol. I went to the shopping center, but the working hours began at 5pm, and it was noon, and I couldn't wait that long because I had an appointment with an Eagle Pass dealer in the afternoon. Before leaving, I looked for another store: Music across the border, where I did manage to talk with its owner, Ms. Chapa, who nevertheless did not want me to record her voice, which was a request that was repeated in other places. Such refusal to be recorded is a serious obstacle for researchers, since it forces us to write very quickly and we can only write down fairly general information, so the reader will find here very few quotation marks. Having become accustomed to interviewing Norteño and Tejano musicians for hours with a digital recorder in hand, the request to not use this machine surprised me, and I attributed such a request or demand to the culture of insecurity in the border area, especially in Mexico.

After waiting for her to open the store, the owner of Music across the border agreed to talk to me, and she turned out to be Mexican, daughter

of the owners of the aforementioned *Curiosidades Acuña*, indicating that the warehouse in Ciudad Acuña has 60 years of history. She stated that the sale of musical instruments did not bring her much profit compared to Mexican handcrafts, and she also said that in Del Rio she had less profit than in Mexico, so she planned to close her store for good[14]. One of the things she talked about was the competition they have with huge online stores like *Guitar Center*, a complaint I heard in pretty much all of my conversations during the trips.

That same day I returned to Eagle Pass to visit *Treviño's Music Store* on Main Street, a family business with 50 years of service in the area. Unfortunately, the octogenarian Mr. Treviño was ill, so I only spoke with his wife and an employee, who mentioned that sales had gradually declined in recent years because people prefer to buy online or in music superstores[15].

The next day, I crossed the border again to Piedras Negras and went to *El mundo de la guitar* ("The world of the guitar", which also sells bajo sextos, accordions and electric instruments on request) on Emilio Carranza Avenue, where its owner Eduardo, from Monterrey, willingly agreed to answer my questions, even though he was giving guitar lessons to a boy, and, at the same time, helping several people who came in looking for strings and other accessories. He explained that he had already been living in the north of Coahuila for many years and that, without being an extraordinary business, the sales of musical instruments and accessories (as well as guitar lessons) gave him a living[16].

Later that day, I went to a Christian book and musical instrument store on López Mateos Avenue, where the owner, Mr. Muñoz, was very busy serving several customers, so he did not treat me as well as the previous owners of music stores. When I explained to him that the reason for my visit was to find out details of the sale of musical instruments in the region, he told me with annoyance that I should go to Monterrey to ask, because in the capital of Nuevo León there is greater economic movement[17]. Perhaps thinking that someone wanted to rip him off, he did not allow me to record our chat, nor did he want to provide data on his earnings or the number of instruments he sells but, as an authorized Hermes Music dealer, his business is the one with the best variety and the most prosperous of all that I visited on the border of Coahuila and Texas, at the level of some shops that I later explored in McAllen, Texas.

After receiving the rejection to share information, I looked for another reference to what seemed to be a music store that I saw on the internet, but it turned out to be the home of a member of a musical group for parties. Later, I walked to the municipal market, because I remembered that one of my previous interviewees, accordionist Rubén Castillo, of conjunto norteño *Los pingüinos del norte,* made the place happy every day, but unfortunately, he was not playing that day. In the afternoon, back in Eagle Pass, I tried to find a couple of musicians by phone, but I could not contact them, and I did not find an archive or newspaper library in the towns I passed through. Piedras Negras has an historical archive, but no one could give me an account of where it was located. In the middle of a cold, foggy

and dimly lit morning at the beginning of February, I returned home taking with me some pages with notes, which I could barely transcribe during the subsequent days.

In the summer of that same year, and after driving some seven hours to Monterrey and Reynosa, I arrived in Hidalgo County, in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas, on July 21. The next morning, I traveled to Edinburgh, where years before I had done research at the University of Texas Panamerican (UTPA). This university recently merged with other border institutions, and now is the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). Due to new regulations, they informed me that currently it is necessary to be a student or teacher of the institution to be able to consult the files, for which I was denied access. For this reason, I returned to McAllen to visit its public library, where I had access to the national databases, especially those of border newspapers in Spanish. The next day, I dedicated the morning to work in the same library, managing to collect some notes related to the history of music on the border.

During the extremely hot Texas summer afternoon, I resumed my field work visiting *Hermes Music*, located downtown, but no one wanted to be interviewed, asking me to come back on Monday to speak with the manager, Mr. Juan. I was informed that the owner, the above-mentioned Alberto Kreimerman, lives on a nearby island, and is very rarely seen in the establishment. Later, I went to another music house, but it was already closed, so on Sunday I inspected *Melhart Music Store*, on 10th Street, where I spoke with Arturo (Art) Baca, who has been selling musical instruments for almost thirty years[18]. That same day, in the afternoon, I went to the huge *Guitar Center* warehouse off of Highway 83, where I was able to talk with Mr. Salinas, another person with a long history in selling instruments[19]. On Monday I returned to Hermes Music, but even though I was waiting for a while, the manager never came, so I went back home.

On this trip, due to a minor traffic accident, I didn't have time to go to Reynosa, Tamaulipas, but an Internet search revealed that the city had at least three music stores that sold accordions and bajo sextos, which was surprising when we considered that Reynosa is located between two powerful economic centers: Monterrey and the Rio Grande Valley. I collected a descent amount of information related to the music industries, businesses that are more productive than in the border strip of Coahuila and Texas. In the Lower Valley, I met suppliers of musical instruments and accessories with enormous experience, such as the already named Art Baca, who has three decades of work experience, in addition to having been a musician. He confirmed this fact with a treasured photograph of him playing alongside legendary Tejano accordionist Steve "The Patch" Jordan.

At Guitar Center, Hermes Music, and Melhart Music, all located in McAllen, Texas, my interviewees commented that commercial transactions related to musical instruments have grown since 2014, when Tejano conjunto programs were officially implemented in local schools, which came to join the traditional marching band courses. They

assured that the commercialization of these musical instruments is a good business, having had permanent sales for decades, except for a notable collapse during the severe Mexican economic crisis of the mid-1990s. This fact confirms the significance of money from Mexican citizens in South Texas, especially those who come from Monterrey and Saltillo who, as I was informed, are some of the most assiduous consumers. These establishments also received clients who travel from Guadalajara and Mexico City, as I could corroborate by looking at the license plates in their parking lots.

I should note that in my research travels I had time to visit local museums on both sides of the border, and I noticed that these places, which promote culture and tradition, are generally empty, while, despite the devaluation of the Mexican peso against the US dollar, it was difficult to find a parking spot in the region's shopping centers. This speaks to the powerful commercial vocation of these cities. All the stores that I could see import directly or through other subsidiaries, and their showcases display musical instruments produced in various countries, including Mexico, China, and Spain. From the latter country, it was intriguing to find a couple of bajo sextos, instruments of regional music highly desired on the border, extremely ornamented with marquetry and mother-of-pearl shell, priced at more than a thousand dollars. Both Treviño's Music Store and Guitar Center had instruments of such high cost and distinction.

As for the customer who buys their products, the Store Managers assured me that they attract a wide variety of people, many who, when choosing an instrument, generally prioritize price and brand. These are individuals from across the social strata, and the employees respect these customers because "we serve people who look like tramps who buy an accordion or a two-thousand-dollar bajo sexto"[20]. It is noteworthy that most of their clients are young, and another outstanding point is that all these music houses have internet sales but, according to the vendors, the customers use the network only as a general reference, preferring to see and play the instruments before making a decision. Thus, in the case of Norteño and Tejano music, a single music house, Melhart Music, sells on average a dozen accordions and another dozen bajo sextos per month, and such sales increase significantly during the holiday season.

But if sales of new musical instruments and accessories make good business, I have also considered music stores that retail in second-hand instruments. The circulation of used musical instruments is another crucial line of research that deserves more attention, since there are Mexican musicians who frequently make trips to South Texas to buy instruments in pawn shops, which they later repair and sell in Mexico. José Garza (known as Pepe Charango) is an example of the above; he has sold a good number of musical instruments, and also has a collection of old instruments, among which one and two row button accordions from the early 20th century stand out[21].

In addition to the sale of used musical instruments, the stores of our region also have repair and maintenance services, without counting

the important mission of providing music classes focused on various instruments. Finally, in addition to the marching bands and the classes of Tejano conjuntos in schools, I had references that in the Rio Grande Valley there is currently a boom in rock and country, which generates sales of specific instruments and accessories for each musical genre, like electric and folk guitars.

Conclusions

During 2016, the same year I did fieldwork in northeastern Mexico and southern Texas, the "global music industry" (understood only as the "recording industry") reported that recorded music revenues increased 5.9%[22], while in Mexico the profits grew 23.6%. At local level, in an online survey that I applied to fifty musicians from the border it is remarkable that 60% of them spend more than $500 annually on repairs or the purchase of accessories.

With the evidence presented here, I have been able to verify that the cultural industries related to sound-producing objects are important economic forces on this region. In addition to the services they offer (lessons, repairs and tuning) they generate employment and movement of capital in the zone. Julián Woodside, a specialist of sound semiotics, regrets the lack of sources to study the music industries in Mexico, "in order to evaluate its complexity, contemplate in the same space both the economic and political aspects, as well as the cultural, historical and symbolic that have an impact on that industry"[23].

It is undoubtedly a complex issue, but this article tries to fill the information gap, and offers an approach to examining the music industry in the border area of northeast Mexico and South Texas. American music historian Marie Sumner Lott asserted that during the nineteenth century the middle classes were the "larger portion of musical consumers", those "with the resources to purchase sheet music, take music lessons and buy instruments"[24]; but nowadays the cheap music editions and instruments produced in China have democratized the music market, and we have found that all social classes in the study region participate in this market. For his part, American ethnomusicologist, Mark Slobin, declared that "travel and trade have always put music in the backpack and the saddlebag"[25], hence the importance of studying commerce, because the merchants who promoted musical pieces, instruments and accessories, have played a key role in the dissemination of our music genre: "no one knew better what was going to be sold and what was not going to be sold"[26].

We have been able to document the passion for music in the border communities, and despite the presence of large stores such as Guitar Center, family businesses have managed to survive the financial ups and downs of both countries. The economic contribution of such music industries is indisputable, but we must also recognize their influence in the construction of social spaces that shape the regional identity of their participants.

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