

# A Special Series of Music Concerts and Dances devoted to **MASTERS OF REGIONAL & ETHNIC TRADITIONS**

**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 9**

Concert and Dance

Conjunto Music of Texas and Mexico

**ECOS DEL NORTE**

American Legion Hall

**FRIDAY, MARCH 1**

Concert

Chinese Erhu and Missouri Fiddle Music

**JI QIU MIN**

**VESTA JOHNSON**

Studio Theatre

**SATURDAY, MARCH 16**

Concert and Dance

Music from the Tatra Mountains of Poland

**POLISH HIGHLANDERS**

American Legion Hall

**FRIDAY, APRIL 5**

Concert

Country and Urban Blues

**YANK RACHELL**

**JOHN CAMPBELL**

Studio Theatre

**SATURDAY, APRIL 20**

Concert and Dance

German-American Music

**KARL AND THE COUNTRY**

**DUTCHMEN**

American Legion Hall



**FRIDAY, MAY 3**

Concert

Music from Puerto Rico and Ireland

**ANDANDO SOLO**

**JIMMY KEANE**

Studio Theatre

Concert-only programs will be held at the Libertyville High School Studio Theatre, 708 W. Park (Route 176), Libertyville, IL.

Concert/Dances will be held at the American Legion Hall, 715 N. Milwaukee (Route 21) in Libertyville. Concert/Dance programs will feature a concert followed by a participatory dance with demonstrations and basic instruction. All events will begin at 8:00 p.m.

**For tickets or other information call:**

**(708) 367-0707.**

This series is supported in part by grants from Baxter Healthcare Corporation, the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

**DAVID ADLER**  
**CULTURAL CENTER**

GATEWAY TO THE ARTS



## Trini Esparza y Los Ecos del Norte

Contrary to the impression commonly engendered by the mass media, the Mexican-American community in the Chicago area is long-standing and is not composed wholly of recent emigres to the Midwest. Mexican workers were employed in the mills of Gary and East Chicago, Indiana as far back as the 1910s. Little Village-- Chicago's oldest Hispanic neighborhood-- was first settled in the 1920s.

Another often overlooked fact in the commentary on the growing Latino presence in American life is that many people of Hispanic descent may claim as their ancestral homes portions of the American Southwest, including New Mexico, Colorado, and California. The cultural group represented in tonight's program hails from an area of the United States that once belonged to Mexico; a place with which many Chicago-area *Mexicanos* have special ties: the Texas-Mexico border region. These people, *Tejanos*, have their own unique music known as *musica Nortena*.

The story of Trini Esparza's grandparents is typical of the experience of many *Tejanos*. His grandparents on his father's side were from Mexico, from the border state of Nuevo Leon. They crossed the river in the 1920s to work in the cotton fields of Texas. His mother's parents were born in Texas, though his maternal great-grandfather came from the Mexican side of the *Rio Grande*.

As is the case with all of the peoples who have come to live inside the borders of the United States, they brought their music with them. Trini tells that they sang old songs while picking cotton. Some of those old songs were the ones Trini started out with when forming his first band while still a teenager. By the time his parents' generation had reached courting age in Texas, a dynamic tradition of social dancing had evolved. At that time, however, dances were held on the dirt, not in dance halls or on wooden floors. The bands of the day consisted of violins, *arpas* (harps), and one or more accordions.

This was an exciting and creative time in the Tex-Mex music scene, for various traditional elements were beginning to come together. In the 1930s and '40s, they would crystallize into a unique new style of folk music. It is difficult to trace the full contours of this evolution. Historical documents, of course, tell us more about the music heard in polite society on both sides of the border. It is clear, however, that small string ensembles featuring some combination of violins, harps, guitars and mandolins could be heard in the countryside in the early years of this century.

It is also certain that the accordion-- the button box variety, not the piano accordion-- was a common solo instrument and the one most likely to produce the music for dancing at weddings, *fiestas*, and other *funciones*. What is not clear is how the accordion found its way to this corner of the globe. One theory is that Mexican musicians adopted it from neighboring German or Czech farmers on the Texas side of the border. Others speculate that the instrument was introduced here by German brewers who settled in Monterey, the capitol of Nuevo Leon.



The 1930s saw the accordion, a lead instrument that could also provide melodic fills between vocal phrases, joined with a solid rhythm section of bass, drums, and *bajo sexto*. The latter is the uniquely Mexican ingredient in this musical concoction of European and native instrumentation. The *bajo sexto* looks like a huge twelve-string guitar, but is tuned in fourths: E-A-D-G-C-F.

Trini Esparza, born in 1944 in Houston, was one of the first *Tejano* musicians to bring the *bajo sexto* to northern Illinois. Actually, he started out on guitar, which was the instrument his father played. The Esparza family had moved to Waukegan when Trini was five years old because there was steady seasonal work picking vegetables on the farms around Chicago. Trini's father was an avid fan of *Nortena* music who bought enough 70 rpm records that Trini grew up surrounded with the sounds of Tony de la Rosa, Los Hermanos Gaitan, and other artists from his native region. When Trini tried to play along with these recordings on guitar, he discovered the sound wasn't quite right.

*"Somehow, I didn't think the six-string guitar was built for the accordion. The bajo sexto was for the accordion, designed to play with the accordion. That's why I wanted to play the bajo sexto so bad. It just didn't sound good to me to use the six-string guitar."*

He convinced his father that he wanted to play a *bajo sexto*, and soon they were off to Houston where Trini could obtain his own instrument and rudimentary instructions from a friend of the family.

By this time, Trini had already formed a band-- *Trini Esparza y su Conjunto*. His music career really began informally, in that he was simply getting together with his cousin, an accordionist, to practice. But there weren't other bands in the Waukegan area playing the kind of music that Tony de la Rosa performed in Milwaukee and East Chicago. Soon Trini's *conjunto* had a few jobs, and his second career in music was underway.

Through the years, Trini has fronted a number of lineups, using a variety of names; but all have featured the *Nortena* core of accordion, *bajo sexto*, bass, and drums. This musical style has continued to evolve. Where at one time *conjuntos Nortenas* may have relied mostly on instrumental dance music such as the polka, *vals* (waltz), *chotis* (schottische), bolera, and *huapango* (a native form); since World War II, vocals with close duet harmony have become ever more prominent. The songs are largely *rancheros*-- romantic longings for an idyllic country life-- performed in polka or waltz time. A newer addition to the repertoire, and perhaps the most popular currently, is the pan-Latin *cumbia*, a stirring dance in duple meter.

A word should be said about what to call this music. In some circles it simply suffices to say "*conjunto*" in order to specify the rural, working-class style of music that is related to, but still separate from the more genteel style known as "*orquesta*." In other situations it may be necessary to add "*Nortena*" to signify a style of Mexican music played mostly north of the border but also in the region around Nuevo Leon. In the industrial Midwest, some musicians have described this music as *Tejano*, meaning it is an older down-home style distinct from the newer style known as "*Chicano*" music. The latter style also makes heavy use of the polka and *cumbia*, but features electronic keyboards rather than accordions, and electric guitars instead of the *bajo sexto*.



Trini Esparza, whose *El Conjunto Fortuna* was first recorded for the David Adler Cultural Center in 1987, leads the only traditional *conjunto Nortena* in Lake County. But he is plugged into a circuit of bands and dances that stretches throughout the Great Lakes region. His desire is to promote the music that he loves. To do this, he has started a record label, Tejano Records, with the stated hope of helping other young bands start down the path he has followed. Other members of Los Ecos del Norte include Roberto Guzman playing accordion; Abran Aquire, Jr., on drums (*batera*); Francisco Medina playing bass; and vocalist Gelacio Reyes.

--By Paul Tyler

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