

Old School Polkas del Ghost Town, and Other Conjunto Music from South Texas Lorenzo Martinez and Ramon 'Rabbit' Sanchez This recording presents the essence of authentic old school conjunto music, straight out of San Antonio's West Side. Lorenzo Martinez and Ramon "Rabbit" Sanchez are two master musicians who have played at the innovative edge of conjunto for more than half a century. This is puro conjunto. Nowadays you won't find the name Ghost Town on a map of San Antonio. Back in the fifties it was the nickname given to the rough neighborhood of dirt streets by the kids who lived near the Good Samaritan Center, around Saltillo Street and SW 19th. "Really nothing ghost about it," says Lorenzo Martinez. "It's just a name that the guys came up with. It was a bad ass neighborhood back in those days. One of the most famous in the city." Even on the astoundingly music-rich West Side of San Antonio, where conjunto thrived then and now, Ghost Town remains famous as the neighborhood which produced a large number of the very best musicians. Lorenzo grew up there, part of the early wave of young conjunto innovators in the 1950s. He mastered the accordion by listening to and learning from the older generation of foundational musicians, and by playing and competing with the rising group of excited and talented kids putting together conjuntos of their own for the cantinas and dance halls. Lorenzo and Rabbit play a much wider and virtuosic range of music than just polkitas. They boast a rare and beautiful repertoire that is no longer being played by contemporary conjunto musicians. Conjunto has continually evolved to incorporate other styles like boleros even as some distinct older styles, rhythms, and songs have faded. This older music includes mazurkas, schottisches, waltzes, and redovas, all of which Lorenzo and Rabbit have continued to play. This album features a small sampling of Lorenzo and Rabbit's range, and also includes one of their specialties: paso dobles done conjunto style. These complex and multi-part pieces, often intended for the violin, came originally from Spain and were featured in bullfights. Paso dobles are difficult to play and not usually attempted by conjunto musicians. As the accordion replaced the fiddle as the principal instrument for dance music in Mexican-American border music in the early part of the twentieth century, paso dobles almost entirely disappeared. Lorenzo and Rabbit here play uncommon polkas and paso dobles in their unique style. They have selected some largely forgotten polkas played back in the day in Ghost Town and other melodies that have never before been recorded on conjunto button accordion and bajo sexto.

Some Background on Conjunto for the Uninitiated The word "conjunto" simply means "group" or "ensemble" in Spanish, but in Texas the name refers to a specific musical genre with a defined structure, repertoire, style, and social context. The name "conjunto" has developed something of a talismanic power in itself, evoking more than just a style of music to tap into a deep sense of community and a strong current of cultural and regional pride. Puro Conjunto, the true vine of conjunto, is a cultural force and a state of mind as much as it is a music. Conjunto music is the music of Mexican-American South Texas, played on the button accordion and a unique twelve string bass called a bajo sexto. Conjunto is dance music and beer drinking music coming straight out of the cantinas and dance halls. Conjunto is most famously known as música alegre, happy music that provides the soundtrack to good times as much as solace for broken hearts. Conjunto music is American music, Southern music, one of the core popular musics to come out of the region in the early twentieth century. Conjunto emerged as a distinct regional genre created by a small set of innovators and musical visionaries easily moving across cultural boundaries. The music and the dance culture that evolved alongside it had a unique development in the early

twentieth century in the hardworking Mexican-American communities of San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley. The style coalesced into a definable style on classic early commercial recordings in the 1930s, and has continued to evolve to this day. Like all of these other core Southern musics, conjunto is a hybrid music, in this case of a melding of European (principally Czech and German) rhythms and melodies with the distinctive flavors, style, and soul of Mexican-Americans of South Texas. The accordion is a German instrument brought to Texas by immigrants. Nobody really knows the full origins of the bajo sexto in Mexico, but the twentieth-century bajo maker who defined the contemporary sound and build was Martín Macías of San Antonio. Brought together, we get the three essentials of conjunto in the button accordion, the bajo sexto, and the polka. From there, the music has been marked by continual innovation in each successive generation of musicians. Conjunto absorbs all sorts of outside influences and sounds, from cumbia to country to jazz, without losing its core drive as a dance music. Conjunto is a vibrant and living tradition of music and dance that remains connected to locality and community, a true model of a sustainable tradition of regional vernacular music making in the United States. Conjunto is the least known of the Southern music styles that also came to commercial prominence in the first decades of the twentieth century, despite the fact that it remains one of the most vibrant. For a variety of reasons rooted in the class prejudice and ethnocentrism of the dominant culture in the U.S., conjunto has never fully been incorporated into the canon of American roots musics either in the marketplace, in the popular mindset, or in the scholarly literature. And yet Texas-Mexican conjunto music must unquestionably be placed as one of the principal vernacular folk musics of the United States, alongside old-time music, Cajun and Zydeco music, blues, jazz, bluegrass, and western swing. Its founders and principal stylists stand alongside the most significant musical innovators and cultural representatives in American history. The heart of conjunto music remains in South Texas, where it continues to be played at clubs, festivals, dances, dance halls, backyard parties, and community events. Conjunto is almost exclusively found in Texas, with outcroppings in California, and small sections of the Midwest and other places where Tejanos settled or migrated for work. The musical culture in South Texas has always combined deep reverence for tradition with an openness and absorption of new musical styles and techniques and a strong progressive sensibility. This recording presents a good piece of that aspect of progressive tradition from two masters. The Musicians: Lorenzo Martinez, accordion. Lorenzo Martinez has lived a life of hard work and musical accomplishment within the community of conjunto players in San Antonio. He is an astounding musician with a progressive and generous spirit. Born December 6, 1939 in Ghost Town, Lorenzo continues to live on the West Side today. He grew up hearing music all around him. He recalls hearing famous San Antonio blind fiddler El Ciego Melquiades play house parties in his neighborhood. The group had three instruments, violin, bajo sexto, and either bass or bowed cello. "In the old days not that many people played accordion in San Antonio. I used to just walk around to the window and just listen." Lorenzo would see Melquiades and other musicians walking in and out of the bars on Guadalupe St., playing songs in the cantinas which lined both sides. Lorenzo started playing accordion as a thirteen year old in 1952, when his grandfather got him lessons from a potbellied old man who used to ride his bicycle around with the accordion on the back. For fifty cents a lesson and some food, the old man taught Lorenzo his first couple of polkas. Eager to learn more, Lorenzo then began taking lessons from Santiago Jimenez, Sr., one

of the principal founders and innovators of conjunto music in San Antonio in the 1930s, and a well-established recording star and popular dance musician. “He was a very patient teacher,” says Lorenzo. “He played one button at a time. Then he would play it so you could hear how it goes.” The Jimenez family lived just a block away, and Lorenzo was good friends with Santiago’s son Leonard, who soon after adopted his father’s nickname Flaco and rose to global stardom as an accordion player. Younger son Santiago Jimenez, Jr. (then known as Jimmy), recalls listening to Lorenzo’s lesson with his father and even remembers the polkas his father taught him. At that time, growing up in Ghost Town, Lorenzo and Flaco played together at parties for kids and others in the neighborhood. Like all the players at the time, Lorenzo started playing a two-row Hohner button accordion. “There was only Hohner, there was no other accordion,” he says. But one day he saw Flaco playing a new three row Hohner. Lorenzo recalls, “I went to my grandfather and convinced him to get me one!” Lorenzo played with a lot of players coming up in that era, including his brothers, and absorbed all he could in terms of technique from other accordionists. He stayed in Ghost Town until he was eighteen, when his family left Texas for a time to work in the fields in Wisconsin. When he returned to San Antonio, he never ventured from Texas again until he and Rabbit were invited to play a show at the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, in March 2016. Some of the tracks of that show are featured in this recording. As a kid of around fourteen, Lorenzo played with Los Tres Valedores at KEXX, San Antonio. He later joined established conjunto Los Caminantes alongside Richard Herrera on drums, Raoul Gutierrez on guitar, Beto Garza as singer, Mike Garza (no relation) on bass, and Richard Castillo on bajo sexto. Both Lorenzo and Rabbit continue to play with Richard today. Lorenzo later went on to play with a variety of conjuntos, including Henry Zimmerle’s conjunto in the late 1960s, playing three nights a week at the Riviera Night Club on N. Flores St., as well as elsewhere. Lorenzo played live on television station KCOR weekly on Thursdays. He learned more music from Gilbert Guardiola, and later recorded with him on Jose Morante’s record labels like Sombrero and Corona. “Gilbert was a mentor. A great accordion player and a great singer,” he recalls. Lorenzo then played with Conjunto Hugo Gonzalez, recorded a handful of 45s on Toby Torres’ TVT label, and had a long, rich musical partnership in Conjunto Rainbow with Larry Tenerias. Lorenzo also has played with other conjuntos and musicians over the years, at dances, festivals, and other events, and recorded a couple of albums. All during this time, Lorenzo worked a series of “day jobs,” since conjunto paid very little and he was raising a family. He worked, “wherever I could get a dollar.” Lorenzo did musical instrument repair, construction, drove a dump truck, worked at the San Antonio airport, and took other positions. He worked as a janitor for many years in the San Antonio public schools until retirement. During this period of time, Lorenzo stopped playing accordion for years to focus on supporting his family and raising his kids, although he did learn to read music and play piano to expand his musical range. Lorenzo returned to focus on accordion after decades and had to relearn much of what he used to play professionally as a teenager. He did this with the help of his old friend Chucho Perales, a legendary bajo sexto player and guitarist who lived next door and who had an exhaustive knowledge of music and a huge passion for playing. “About everything I play on accordion Chucho could play on guitar, and he showed me note for note how they went.” Lorenzo played a lot of music with Chucho and reveres him to this day. Considering his own life trajectory and the value of conjunto music, Lorenzo soon realized that

the most important thing he could do was to pass on his gift and his knowledge to younger generations of musicians. "The accordion is too beautiful! And not too many people know how to use it. How to make music, put it together, and have fun." Lorenzo committed himself to helping others to learn, and soon became a teacher at the Conjunto Heritage Taller in San Antonio, an innovative organization started by Rudy Lopez and others. Lorenzo, being generous in spirit and with his time and skill, turned out to have a singular talent for teaching complex music to students both young and old. Drawing from decades of musical mastery and a background of hard work, Lorenzo helped to build what has become recognized as the model program for conjunto education in Texas. "Now I'm an old man, and I'm having a good time with my music, he says." Each weekend, the Taller is filled with people of all ages taking lessons and jamming, and the program has been so successful that Lorenzo's students have won the Texas-wide Big Squeeze accordion competitions, are featured performers at conjunto festivals, and are professionals or teachers in their own right. Lorenzo says of his avocation as a teacher, "I want to teach these kids, to teach everyone. I want to leave my talent here on earth." Ramon "Rabbit" Sanchez, bajo sexto Rabbit Sanchez, also known as "Jack Rabbit" or "el coñejo," is a legendary and unequalled bajista. During a professional career of more than fifty-seven years, he has influenced a generation of players throughout Texas, as well as across the United States and around the world. Rabbit is one of the most significant and admired bajo players in the history of conjunto music, especially because he has sustained old school techniques utilizing all twelve of the strings on his instrument at a time when many players use simplified patterns on modern ten string bajo quintos. Rabbit, who plays a 1952 Martín Macias bajo nicknamed "Old Dollar," plays old style bajo with verve and punch combined with a progressive sensibility in his runs, chord choices, and voicings. Rabbit's approach is uniquely powerful and soulful, and so sought after for concerts, dances, and recordings that he has played with virtually all of the best conjunto musicians over the past half century. In 1994, Rabbit was the first person to play the bajo sexto at Carnegie Hall. Rabbit was born December 18, 1945 in Corpus Christi, Texas, another center of conjunto music along with San Antonio. He learned guitar and bajo sexto at the age of nine from his father, and first performed at age fourteen with Conjunto La Estrellita. Rabbit made his professional debut touring with Cruz Torres y su Conjunto at just sixteen years old. Cruz Torres played chromatic accordion in a complex and progressive style, "and he would play every chord there was to play," Rabbit recalls. Backing him up required a rapid crash course in progressive bajo playing for Rabbit. "For me it was new. I was used only to those little Hohners. This was hard music, but I picked it up. Thanks to him, he broke me in. When I played with anyone else after that, it was easy. All of that music I just devoured in my brain." Over the years, Rabbit worked many jobs from cotton picking to truck driving. "I used to be a tumbleweed, drifting with the air everywhere. I was never afraid to be alone," he recalls. In 1966, Rabbit sold a 1964 bajo that Martín Macias had just recently made for him to Cruz Torres to get money to move to Chicago for work. (Decades later, Rabbit bought this bajo back from Torres, who had kept it for him all of those years). In Chicago Rabbit spent four years working in a variety of factories while playing conjunto on the side. He assembled filing cabinets for a year, drove a forklift in a plant printing Dr. Seuss books, and made good money working as a machinist building 500 pound bombs for use in the Vietnam War. Chicago was filled with Tejanos at the time, and Rabbit played weekend gigs with a wide variety of bands such as Frank Cardona y Su Conjunto. In

1970, Rabbit moved back to Corpus Christi and continued his professional music career. Over the following decades, Rabbit played dances and festivals across Texas and throughout the U.S. with legendary artists such as Angel Flores, Linda Escobar, Mickey Mendoza, Los Pavos Reales, Los Torbellinos del Norte, Roberto Ruiz, and Agapito Zuñiga. Rabbit's recording legacy is very extensive, having recorded with these artists and others such as Tish Hinojosa, the Tailgators, Shiloh, Oscar G. Hernandez, Marky Lee y Grupo Caliente, and with orchestras such as Isidro Lopez and Roy Montelongo. Rabbit additionally played for many years with Santiago Jimenez Jr. and with his brother Flaco Jimenez. Today, in addition to playing with Lorenzo, Rabbit regularly accompanies Bene Medina at dances in San Antonio and Houston, and is called to help a huge variety of bands at the numerous festivals in the city and in Houston, Corpus Christi, Austin, and elsewhere. One of Rabbit's most productive professional stints was with Mingo Saldivar, known as the Dancing Cowboy. Rabbit received a Grammy nomination with this conjunto for the 2002 recordings of "Blue Moon of Kentucky" and "Mexi-Cajun Cumbia" from the album *A Taste of Texas*. In 2007, Rabbit released a solo CD called *Ramon "Rabbit" Sanchez*. This recording was a collection of traditional music, arranged "al estilo Rabbit." His conjunto was featured that year at the Narciso Martinez Conjunto Festival in San Benito, Texas. In January of 2013, Rabbit was selected as a member of the Tejano Roots Hall of Fame. Rabbit has twice taught bajo sexto as a Master Artist under the auspices of the Texas Folklife Apprenticeship program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and on his own to students who seek him out from across the country. He supports efforts to continue traditional conjunto like the Conjunto Heritage Taller, and is unflaggingly generous in passing on his unique style and innovations. His students now play in some of the top professional conjuntos. Rabbit continues to explore the use of the bajo sexto in music other than traditional conjunto. "A lot of people say that the bajo is limited, but it's not," Rabbit says. "You can play anything on a bajo if you put your mind to it, my friend! You can play anything. It's all in the ability of the musician to dig it out. Anything that can be played on the guitar can be played on the bajo. Put your mind to it, it's true." A flexible and multi-talented artist, Rabbit plays conjunto, Tejano, country, rock 'n' roll, blues, and Cajun music. He has been featured accompanying Belen Escobedo on rare fiddle-bajo tunes at the Festival of Texas Fiddling. Most recently, he has been playing gypsy jazz in the style of Django Reinhardt on both guitar and bajo, making him the first bajista to tackle this virtuosic genre. And of course, as a working musician in San Antonio, Rabbit remains highly sought after as a bajista by traditional and progressive conjuntos alike. While he enjoys teaching and seeing his students succeed, Rabbit remains a performer at heart, and is most in his element on the stage, always striving to perfect his technique, as well as to learn new techniques and styles of music to add to his repertoire. Studio tracks, recorded by Oscar Garcia in San Antonio, September, 2016

1. La Típica – polka (Carlo Curti)
2. La Cachuca – polka (Jimmy Guajardo)
3. Amor en la Playa – vals (Pedro Ayala)
4. Mi Favorita – polka (Paulino Bernal)
5. Muñeca Sin Alma – paso doble (Isaias Salmeron)
6. Carmen de Amor – polka (D.A.R.)
7. El Tio Lorenzo – polka (D.A.R.)
8. El Circo – polka (Tony de la Rosa)
9. Viva Tlapehuala – polka (Isaias Salmeron)
10. Salvador – vals (D.A.R.)

Bonus Tracks recorded live at the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, March 2016

11. El Aguacero – polka (Santiago Jimenez)
12. Untitled Huapango – huapango (D.A.R.)
13. Celito Lindo – polka (D.A.R.)
14. Tres suspiros – ranchera (Rubén Escamilla)
15. Viva Seguin/Muchachas

Alegres – polka (Santiago Jimenez/Narciso Martinez) Track notes: 1. La Típica – polka (Carlo Curti) This is an old polka once popular in Mexico and recorded in the 1930s and 1940s by the likes of Santiago Morales and Los Alegres de Terán, which is most likely how it came to be played by conjuntos in Texas. It is an Italian polka composed by Carlo Curti, an Italian immigrant to the United States credited with creating the Orquesta Típica Mexicana after moving to Mexico. “La Típica” was recorded by Banda Española on a Columbia Phonograph Company cylinder between 1901 and 1909, and by Trio Romani, also known as Cibelli's Neapolitan Orchestra, in 1921 on 78 for Victor Records. It was not uncommon for popular Italian tunes to become widely played by conjuntos in the early recorded era. For example, Narciso Martinez played several Italian pieces, principally mazurkas, which he renamed and transformed into conjunto music. Lorenzo and Rabbit are rare among conjunto musicians for continuing to play these old pieces. 2. La Cachuca – polka. (Jimmy Guajardo) For decades, Lorenzo called this polka “Velma,” which actually is the name of an unrelated Tony de la Rosa polka. Lorenzo knew that he had learned this melody from a recording of accordionist Jimmy Guajardo. “I heard the song on the radio, and other guys played it, it was very popular at that time. I learned it as soon as I heard it and played it for years. I probably slowly changed it, of course, couldn't help it.” Guajardo was a very sophisticated player who recorded for Del Valle in the Valley and for Gabe records in Fort Worth. Lorenzo believed Guajardo's playing competed with the great Paulino Bernal back in the old days. Lorenzo had never seen or met Guajardo, and had no information about him. Accordionist Bene Medina managed to find him in Dallas in the fall of 2016, and in October of that year, Lorenzo, Rabbit and Bene drove up to meet Guajardo in Dallas. He was really pleased to meet them all, and they spent the day playing music. Guajardo informed them that “Velma” was actually called “La Cachuca.” Today, having become friends after all of these years, Guajardo calls Lorenzo and plays polkas to him over the phone. 3. Amor en la Playa – vals. (Pedro Ayala) Pedro Ayala recorded this for Falcon Records in 1949. Lorenzo believes he probably learned this old waltz from Santiago Jimenez, Sr. “He was the teacher of everybody coming up, at that time.” 4. Mi Favorita – polka. (Paulino Bernal) Lorenzo learned this from the Paulino Bernal recording. The two players were the same age, but Paulino was already a very well-known musician rapidly changing the whole understanding of what could be played on conjunto accordion. Lorenzo remembers, “I learned it but I needed a chord I couldn't find, and a friend of Paulino said he was going to the Valley, and since Bernal was over there, if I wanted to go meet him, I should. So I said sure, and went and met Paulino and [his brother] Eloy over there at his house way back. He showed me that chord. And he showed me another polkita. He was about nineteen years old. He had just starting playing, but Paulino was already very advanced.” 5. Muñeca Sin Alma – paso doble (Isaias Salmeron) Lorenzo and Rabbit excel at these complex pieces of music, which allow them both to show the range of the button accordion and the full expressiveness of the bajo. Lorenzo has had a long interest in paso dobles ever since hearing Jesse Borrego, Sr. play “Amor de Borrero.” Lorenzo recalls “That's when I got hooked. They have a lot of music them. They are really pretty and I wanted to learn more of them.” He learned how to read music from a professor at St. Mary's University, and learned keyboard. “I played classical, could read and play. And I thought, “if only I could do this with the accordion!” Dan Margolies obtained transcriptions of the playing of the great Mexican violinist Juan Reynoso done by Paul Anastasio. Lorenzo immediately set out to learn Reynoso's

paso dobles, which he painstakingly transferred from violin to accordion. This is the first conjunto recording of “Muñeca Sin Alma.” 6. Carmen de Amor – polka (D.A.R.) Lorenzo doesn’t know the origin of this polka. He has been playing it a long time, having learned it from Chucho Perales who showed it to him note-by-note on guitar. This is an old polka recorded by early 78 artists like conjunto pioneer Narciso Martinez, Los Montañeses Del Alamo, and on violin with bajo sexto and tololoche by Santiago Morales on November 14, 1936. 7. El Tio Lorenzo – polka (D.A.R.) Lorenzo has played this piece for as long as he can remember. He had long thought this polka was called “La Tia Chema,” and that it came from an old recording of Pedro Ayala, an accordionist whom Lorenzo admires a great deal. It proved impossible to find a recording of Ayala playing it. Hermanos Ayala, Pedro’s sons, recorded a polka called “La Tia Chema,” which had an entirely different melody. Lorenzo and Rabbit tried to discover the true name of this polka one evening in the fall of 2016, and it ended up being a fairly hilarious experience. They called every great conjunto musician of their generation across Texas, all of whom they knew well, to ask if they recognized the melody. Every one of them, from Oscar Hernandez to Eva Ybarra to Santiago Jimenez, Jr., immediately recognized the polka. Chano Cadena even played it on the accordion over the phone. All of the accordionists Rabbit and Lorenzo called that night recognized the melody, and most of them said they played it, but none could recall the name! After a few hours of calling with no luck finding the answer from the greatest conjunto players alive, it seemed sensible to rename this polka “El Tio Lorenzo.” 8. El Circo – polka (Tony de la Rosa) This is a standard conjunto polka still played widely today and used to highlight both the accordion and the bajo. It derives from an old Vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley tune called “Alabama Jubilee,” written by George Cobb, and recorded by Arthur Collins in 1915. It became a hillbilly standard following a 1925 recording by Clayton McMichen’s Home Town Band and numerous others since. Tony De la Rosa famously reimagined it as a conjunto polka with the new name of “El Circo”. It was his first hit song in 1957. 9. Viva Tlapehuala – polka (Isaias Salmeron) This is another rare polka Lorenzo learned from the Juan Reynoso transcriptions. This polka has never been recorded conjunto style. 10. Salvador – vals (D.A.R.) This is a beautiful old waltz popular in Texas and Mexico. Lorenzo says “everybody in San Antonio plays it. It used to be all for weddings, now it’s funerals also.” Lorenzo played “Salvador” at his father’s funeral. The last five tracks on this CD were recorded live at a performance Lorenzo and Rabbit gave at Middle Tennessee State University in March 2016, organized by the Center for Popular Music (parent organization of Spring Fed Records). In this performance, they told stories of their lives in music and played conjunto music in a variety of styles to illustrate the history of the music and its range and diversity. This was the first conjunto program presented by the Center for Popular Music, and it was also the first time that Lorenzo had ever visited Tennessee. 11. El Aguacero – polka (Santiago Jimenez) This is a classic old San Antonio polka written and first recorded by Santiago Jimenez, Sr. 12. Lorenzo’s Huapango – huapango (D.A.R.) Lorenzo says “I have played this my whole life, I don’t know what it’s called.” Huapangos are pieces with a distinctive Mexican rhythm which continue to be featured in conjunto music. 13. Celito Lindo – polka (D.A.R.) This is Lorenzo’s conjunto arrangement of one of the most beloved and best known Mexican songs. 14. Tres Suspiros – ranchera (Rubén Escamilla) This is a classic conjunto love song Rabbit has been singing since the 1960s. 15. Viva Seguin/Muchachas Alegres – polka (Santiago Jimenez/Narciso Martinez) Lorenzo and Rabbit

ended their concert with this lively medley of two conjunto classics. “Viva Seguin” was written by Santiago Jimenez, Sr. and is considered by many to be something like the national anthem of conjunto. It is not uncommon to hear every single conjunto play this polka at a festival in San Antonio at some point in their set. “Muchachas Alegres” was originally recorded by Narciso Martinez and is one of his most recognizable polkas. Notes by Dan Margolies
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