

The one thing that everybody notices when Felipe Perez plays his accordion is that he looks every bit as happy as his music sounds. Full of life, Felipe plays *música alegre* with speed and a tireless verve. And no wonder. Felipe has been playing professionally since 1950 and he shows no signs of slowing. “I’m ready for anything,” he says, continuing to enjoy what life has to offer and looking to share his music.

Felipe was born on October 15, 1940 in Corpus Christi, Texas. His father was born Felipe Negrete. He was, Felipe says with a grin, a “bandito from Mexico” and a relative of the great Jorge Negrete. Fleeing some troubles south of the border, Felipe Sr. changed his last name to Perez after getting to Texas. There was a lot of music in Felipe’s family. It was his uncle Luis Cardona who inspired him to play music. Luis would sit with an accordion, cigar, and a bottle of beer and play music each night. Felipe recalls “I wanted to play because of him.” He first learned to play harmonica. Soon enough, he mastered accordion, bajo sexto, drums, and bass.

Felipe was drawn to music and grew up within earshot of Agnes street in Corpus Christi, where the cantinas filled with conjunto musicians lined both sides of the street. He also went to local platform dances and VFW shows, where he saw players like Manuel Guerrero. Tough as Agnes street was, Felipe began hanging around these cantinas as a little kid, shining shoes for money, absorbing all the music he could, and hunting down the legendary players of the era who were playing, such as the great Juan Lopez.

Felipe’s biggest musical influence was Juan Lopez, an accordion master known as “El Rey de la Redova.” Lopez was a big man who worked the fields during the day and then played at night and on the weekend, always with a case of beer next to him and an inexhaustible knowledge of music. Felipe learned a great deal from him and absorbed Juan’s very fast, lively

style of playing, and his repertoire. "I don't want to brag and use his name, but he brought me up," he says plainly. Today Felipe's playing is about as close to Juan Lopez as you will ever be lucky enough to hear, even as it is unquestionably his own.

Felipe was still saving money for his own instrument when his mother surprised him by taking him to buy a two-row Hohner accordion for \$47. Felipe has strong memories of the moment the accordion was handed across the counter to him, and of his mother's enormous love and support that this act represented.

Felipe very quickly learned to play, and his uncles took him to the cantinas and asked for a chance for him to perform. Astonishingly, within six months of starting to play, Felipe fronted his own conjunto and joined the ranks of professionals.

"Really by 1950 I had a little group over there in Corpus," he recalls. "We were called Los Tres Angeles, the three little angels. We were just kids!" The band included his cousin, Danny Cardona, also ten years old, and Joe Cavazos, who was a year older.

Felipe found his first taste of fame across Texas with a group called Los Sargentos, which toured all over to play dance halls and cantinas in Victoria, Sugarland, Stafford, Pasadena, and places around Corpus. The band featured Felipe, his cousin Rene Hinojosa on guitar, Jimmy Rodriguez on bajo sexto, and Chale (Charlie) Mendoza on drums. Los Sargentos used to play "mano a mano" with some major players like Los Donñenos, Valerio Longoria, and Agapito Zuñiga. They also regularly played for taxi dances, where men paid women a quarter for a dance. "You had to play the songs short so the dancers could make more money. If you played long the ladies would give you looks," Felipe recalls. Los Sargentos recorded 78s for Bohemia Records, backing up Isidro Lopez and Sofia Rodriguez. The group was influential despite the

youth of the players. Nowadays older musicians in San Antonio still remember hearing Los Sargentos on the radio.

Felipe was most known as an accordionist, but he also mastered the bajo sexto. For many years, he played bajo with Juan Lopez. Felipe originally learned to play the bajo from Jose Martinez from Robestown, who was nicknamed La Larga. Martinez was born in 1890, and taught Felipe “everything he knew.” It is not surprising that Felipe learned an old style of bajo playing that perfectly matched the music he was mastering on the accordion, with singular licks for huapangos and redovas in particular. The two played together for many years. “He liked the way I played because I played like Juan Lopez and the old timers,” Felipe recalls. Martinez played at Felipe’s wedding. Later his sons Willie and Anselmo played with Felipe.

Corpus Christi boasted some of the finest bajistas in Texas and Felipe has played with most of them over the years. One of the best was his longtime bandmate Ruben Gomez, who he played with for many years before he passed on. Felipe continued to record with Jimmy Rodriguez from Los Sargentos for decades. He now lives in California. Felipe also played with Tony Amaya, called La Rata, Juan Gonzalez, and many others. Legendary *bajista* Ramon “Rabbit” Sanchez, just a few years younger than Felipe, remembers admiring his playing when he was just getting started. Felipe still plays with “Jackrabbit,” as he calls him with his old Corpus nickname. Most recently, Felipe has been playing with Virginio Castillo, a San Antonio *bajista* who has also been playing for 57 years and is considered one of the finest and most old school *bajistas* in San Antonio. His crisp playing style fits Felipe’s music perfectly.

Felipe gets pretty animated when he tells stories of playing in Corpus Christi nightclubs as a kid. With good reason—the Corpus cantinas back then were colorful and violent places and

he has a lot of astonishing stories. He witnessed fights, people being stabbed with knives and broken bottles, shootings, and even killings. “Boy I tell you, all kind of stuff you would see!” When there was a fight, a stabbing, or a shooting, the same routine was followed. “Kick him out, like a dog, soon as possible!”

“There were cantinas all over. El 1-2-3- Club, CC Club, Elephant Club, La Chona, El Tropical. Four or five places, all right next to each other.” One time at El 1-2-3, Felipe saw a guy stand in the door and shoot right into the bar. “He didn’t hit anybody but you could see the gun flash. I was playing, I just went down to the bottom of the floor. Oh man! Adolfo Garcia, who played with Juan Lopez and was helping me out that night, he was on the floor too! We wanted to hide inside the drums.”

Felipe was playing at La Chona one time. The club had big windows open to the street. A woman walking by saw her man dancing with another woman. “The woman came right up and shot him in the face.” She didn’t get arrested or apparently ever pay a price for it. That same lady came in a week or two later and threw a bottle at Felipe’s head while he was performing.

After returning to Corpus in the late 1970s, Felipe played and booked music at Los Reyes de la Polka night club for many years. “That place was worse than any place on the West Side” of San Antonio, Felipe recalls with a laugh. “The owner killed one guy there, dragged him out and out him outside. When the police came over ‘I don’t know what happened.’ He didn’t see anything.’ Ha ha ha! Oh man, did he get enemies!”

During the time he was playing conjunto full time, Felipe married in 1958 (at age seventeen) to the eternal love of his life, Minerva. He had worked picking cotton, setting pins in a bowling alley, and even did a stint as a Golden Gloves boxer. But all that work made him think

“No more of this—I’ll stick to my music in the cantinas!” Minerva stayed home when Felipe played until late at night. His mother would console her by saying “well, that’s the life of a musician’s wife. You aren’t going to take the music out of Felipe.” Felipe recalls that “I’d get home around 1 o’clock in the morning. Minerva was really modest.” She let Felipe follow his own path through the world. Eventually he became a Jehovah’s Witness and was baptized November 23, 1963. The couple moved to Chicago to be missionaries. Felipe happily recalls “my many years in Jehovah’s service. I got so enthused with it I sold everything, sold all my accordions and everything. To go away and be a missionary. I sacrificed, yes. But later I learned that you don’t have to give up your music. You can learn about the Bible and be selective of your music, and just don’t go all crazy and be vulgar. Show your talent.”

When Felipe finished his missionary work in Illinois he was transferred for a time to San Antonio, where he also began a fruitful recording and gigging career under the name Felipe Perez y Sus Polkeros. Membership of the group changed over time as they recorded albums for Joey International. “When I started playing again, I was really selective about what kind of places I would go play. And the same when I was back in Corpus with my kids, always being very careful.” Felipito, his son, soon joined the group on drums. Today Felipe plays with Virginio on bajo sexto and Ramon Gutierrez on tololoche, a Mexican variant of the upright bass. Ramon is an astonishing singer and widely considered to be the best upright bass player in San Antonio. Felipe also often performs with bassist Rudy Calderon, a fellow Jehovah’s Witness who retired from years on the road with Flaco Jimenez.

Felipe moved his wife and children back to Corpus Christi in the late 1970s and led a happy life of family, hard work, and music until Minerva was tragically killed in a horrific

accident caused by an inattentive driver sideswiping Felipe's van. Felipe, his daughter, and granddaughter were all ejected from his van when it rolled, but miraculously survived. Felipe was told by his doctor that playing accordion was the best possibly physical therapy for his injured shoulder, and so Felipe returned to music. Ten years after losing his wife and still feeling the loss very heavily, Felipe decided "I don't want to kill myself because of my love for my wife and my kids." So he moved to San Antonio near his daughter and began a new and happy chapter of his life and music.

Felipe is a powerful player who makes a lasting impression on whoever hears him. When he moved to San Antonio in 2005 and played on KEDA radio, Santiago Jimenez Jr. invited him over to his studio to record. The two ended up recording several cds worth of material with Santiago backing Felipe up on bajo sexto, bass, and vocals. It is the rare accordionist indeed who gets a famous musician happy simply to back them for recording. Santiago says, "Felipe is a heavy player, man."

Felipe has led the kind of hardworking life that is commonplace among conjunto musicians. He has done it all. He had his own carpet installation business, did all manner of repair work, and also became a master accordion tuner. Tuning is a true art form as well as an essential skill for conjunto musicians. Important as it is, tuning is also a rare talent. After getting some tips from Valerio Longoria, who is recognized as an innovator tuner as well as a pioneering accordionist, Felipe has developed his own unique system and techniques of tuning over the decades. Currently he is acting as a Master in the Texas Folklife Apprenticeship program teaching accordion tuning to Lorenzo Martinez, himself a master accordionist (and with Rabbit Sanchez, the subject of SFR 112: *Old School Polkas Del Ghost Town*)

This cd features almost all original music composed by Felipe during his most prolific years gigging and recording. Most of these tracks were recorded in one take and there are no overdubs. What you are hearing is a group of astonishing musicians who have defined as well as mastered the true sound of *puro conjunto*.

### **The Tracks:**

Felipe has been writing polkas and other pieces and songs since he started playing music. He has thirty or forty compositions including a moving song called “Mi Madrecita” about his mother. These are among his favorites.

Felipe remembers where and when he composed his pieces, when he learned the polkas he got from players like Juan Lopez, Hermanos Cardenas, Los Alegres de Terán, or others, and where and when he played them. Unlike a lot of older musicians who have performed for more than sixty years, Felipe remembers it all and can tell tales of his life as long as you would like!

#### **1. Texas En Polka:**

That was Juan Lopez’s polka, and is one of Felipe’s favorites

#### **2. Los Tres Felipes**

Felipe wrote this polka in 1977, right around when his son Felipito was born. Felipe taught his son to play bajo sexto, bass, and drums, and often gigs and jams with him.

#### **3. Sulamita**

Felipe wrote this redova for his daughter in 1984, when she was born. Every time one of his children was born, Felipe composed a polka or redova for them.

#### **4. El La Jalapeña**

Felipe composed this in 1980 thinking of the Corpus radio station KCCT, which was related to KEDA in San Antonio. “I composed that polka because they have that Jalapeño radio network. They used to play it like crazy on the radio, all the time.”

#### **5. Mis Recuerdos**

“I composed that one in 1978, when we got back from Chicago and I had Felipito with me. He was about one year old.”

#### 6. El Chupa Y Sopla

Felipe wrote this polka about a vacuum cleaner in the Eighties, it was always one of his most popular.

#### 7. El Galopito

"I arranged this in the late seventies, when I was doing missionary work. On my days off, on Mondays I would sit down with an old accordion that I bought for five dollars in Wisconsin." Felipe came into the accordion while out doing a missionary visit, he saw it in a guy's house and was offered it for five dollars. "I didn't have five dollars, I was *broke!* A genuine missionary! I didn't do any other secular work at the time."

8. Alicia: A piece by Felipe written for his daughter-in-law.

#### 9. El Grillito

"That's mine, wrote it in the 1980s, I was playing in El Rey del la Polka in Corpus, they really liked it." Felipe said he named it for the way people danced it, like grasshoppers.

#### 10. Al Zaz y Zaz

"I wrote that. Zaz was Joey International's studio, he had several."

#### 11. El Gorgoreo

a huapango from Juan Lopez

#### 12. La Teclita:

"I've been playing it for years since the late seventies, never did have a name for it. Then when I came up to san Antonio we named it. I was playing with Santiago, and Jackrabbit was there too, and I came out with that and we tossed out a bunch of names and someone said, well that has a lot of teclitas in it. So we baptized it with that name."

#### 13. Bailando en los Cueros

Another of Felipe's pieces." We used to go to a ranch outside of Monterrey. The name of the ranch was 'Bailando en los Cueros' That was in the 90s."

#### 14. La Mosquita Muerta

"that's an old one." This mazurka is named for an old Spanish saying about a woman who looks harmless like a dead mosquito but who will bite you. Felipe learned it from Juan Lopez.

#### 15. El Ciringue

Felipe named this after his uncle, who was a hard man who went to prison for murder, murdered another man while there, and then died behind bars. "Oh man, I wrote this way after we went to prison, when I learned his story."

#### 16. Tabita

Felipe first recorded in 1981, to mark the birth of his daughter.

17. El Zerruchito

Another great huapango from Juan Lopez

18. LLorando en el Cementerio

“Somewhere in the late seventies I learned that.”

19. Robestown Polka

This great polka comes from Juan Lopez, who learned it from his uncles who played it on the fiddle. Felipe recalls: “Everybody used to say “hey Felipe’s from Robestown, because this polka really hit for me, really did. But, of course, I was from Corpus.”

20. A Media Noche

A beautiful old waltz played by Los Montañeses Del Alamo

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