

World's Top Online Archive of Mexican, Mexican American Recordings Launched

Contributed by Letisia Marquez - UCLA
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Los Angeles, California - The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center announced today that the public can now access the Arhoolie Foundation's Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings - the largest online digital archive of its kind.

The archive includes more than 41,000 recordings and is a treasure trove of historical Spanish-language songs dating from the early 1900s to the 1950s.

Joining UCLA in making the announcement were Los Tigres del Norte, the multiple Grammy Award-winning norteño group and major funders of the digitization of the Frontera Collection's 78 rpm recordings; the Arhoolie Foundation, whose president, Chris Strachwitz, collected the recordings; and the UCLA Library, which created and manages the online archive.

"The Frontera Collection will be an invaluable resource for students, scholars and the public seeking to learn more about the Spanish-language musical heritage of North America," said Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center and a film and television professor.

Full-length versions of each song can be accessed from computers on the UCLA campus or by those accessing the campus network through its proxy server. However, due to copyright restrictions, only the first 50 seconds of each song will be accessible from computers off campus.

In 2000, the Los Tigres del Norte Foundation donated \$500,000 to UCLA to establish the Los Tigres del Norte Fund at the Chicano Studies Research Center. This fund provided major support to digitize about 30,000 78 rpm recordings made between approximately 1905 to 1955.

"Los Tigres del Norte have not only made their own lasting contribution to popular culture, they have ensured that future generations will be able to appreciate and study the Spanish-language recordings made in the first half of the 20th century," Noriega said.

Los Tigres del Norte bandleader Jorge Hernández said, "Los Tigres del Norte is very proud to have been a part of the preservation of so many historic recordings from our musical forebears.

"This collection will provide the next generation of Mexican and Mexican American music artists with previously unimaginable access to our rich cultural history, and in doing so, will help them expand the appreciation of Spanish-language music even further in the future."

Also in the archive are 45 rpm recordings dating from about 1955 to the 1990s, which the Arhoolie Foundation continues to digitize.

The digitization process protects these rare and fragile recordings from being lost or damaged. It also allows the public easy access for the first time to the most popular and influential Spanish-language digital recordings of the 20th century.

The Frontera Collection encompasses a vast array of musical and performance styles, including early corridos, boleros, sones, patriotic speeches and comedy skits.

Among the collection's many gems are the first known recordings, in 1908, of the mariachi group Cuarteto Coculense in Mexico City; the first recordings, in 1928, by Tejano music legend Lydia Mendoza and her family; and the first recordings, in 1937, by accordion pioneer Narciso Martinez.

The singers and musicians who made these records helped popularize and preserve a number of traditions that constitute the roots of current Mexican and Mexican American music. Many of these records are one of a kind and were originally recorded by companies that no longer exist.

Starting in the 1960s, Chris Strachwitz, president of the Arhoolie Foundation, scoured record stores, jukebox companies, radio stations and people's homes, largely in South Texas, to find records for the collection. Along the way, he also convinced record companies to sell him their 78 rpm records, which were no longer being recorded and were stored away in warehouses.

"When I first heard Mexican ranchera music, I was just fascinated by these accordion players and their wonderful polkas," said Strachwitz, who initially ran across the music on a Santa Paula, Calif., radio station in the late 1940s. "I

couldn't understand the lyrics, but it had the same soulful feeling as other vernacular music."

The collection includes records from such major labels as Victor, Columbia and Vocalion, as well as smaller, regional labels like Rio, Discos Universal, Ideal, Falcon and Orfeo.

Strachwitz and the late Guillermo Hernandez, a UCLA Spanish professor and noted corrido expert, introduced the vast collection to Los Tigres del Norte.

Scholars throughout the nation are already using the archive for their research.

At UCLA, brothers Jorge and Luis Herrera, who also are pursuing musical careers, have used the archive both in their research and to find inspiration from old songs.

Jorge, who is working on a doctorate in ethnomusicology, is writing his dissertation on how norteño and other traditional Mexican music styles changed when Mexican musicians crossed into the United States.

Luis, who used the archive to complete his master's degree in Latin American studies at UCLA, said the brothers also have discovered old lyrics through the archive, which they have then adapted for their performances.

"If it wasn't for the Frontera Collection, there's no way a common person could get their hands on this kind of music," said Luis, who belongs to the norteño band Los Hermanos Herrera. "It's a little treasure chest of music that very few people know about."

The Fund for Folk Culture, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Grammy Foundation, the Lucasfilm Foundation and others also provided funding for digitizing the Frontera Collection.

The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), founded in 1969, supports faculty and students across the university and provides access to the community as well as scholars from around the world. Its research addresses the growing Chicano and Latino population, which now constitutes nearly one-third of California and one-half of Los Angeles but continues to have disproportionately low access to higher education. The CSRC houses a library and special collections archive, an academic press, research projects, community partnerships, two competitive grant/fellowship programs and the Los Tigres del Norte Fund. It is also the host of a new book series on Latino artists titled "A Ver: Revisioning Art History." For more information, visit www.chicano.ucla.edu.

The UCLA Library, ranked among the top 10 research libraries in the U.S., serves programs of study and research across the campus. Its collections encompass more than 8 million volumes, as well as archives, audiovisual materials, government publications and other scholarly resources. The library also provides access to digital reference works, electronic journals and other full-text titles and resources, and through its Digital Library Program is making unique and rare materials from its collections increasingly available online, including photographs, maps, sound and video recordings, oral histories, manuscripts, and other archival materials. For more information, visit www.library.ucla.edu.

Los Tigres del Norte, hailed by Billboard as the world's "most influential regional Mexican group ... and voice of the immigrant community," have recorded more than 500 songs over the course of nearly 60 albums. With a career spanning four decades, Los Tigres have sold more than 35 million albums, toured throughout the world and received numerous artistic accolades, including multiple Grammy and Latin Grammy awards. In March of 2000, the legendary Mexican music group decided to institutionalize their charitable efforts with the creation of the Los Tigres Del Norte Foundation. The foundation is a California nonprofit corporation that supports worthy nonprofit charitable and community-based organizations in an effort to further the appreciation and understanding of Latino music, culture and history through education and community outreach programs. For more information on the foundation, visit www.lostigresdelnortefoundation.org.

The Arhoolie Foundation was established in 1995 as a public nonprofit educational organization for the purpose of documenting, presenting, preserving and disseminating authentic traditional and regional vernacular music. One of the foundation's first documenting projects was to digitize the Frontera Collection. The foundation also acquires artifacts such as records, photos, and songbooks and maintains an archive to scholars and the general public. For more information, visit www.arhoolie.org.