# Rare Archival Mexican-American Music to be Featured at Special Listening Event in The Mission District
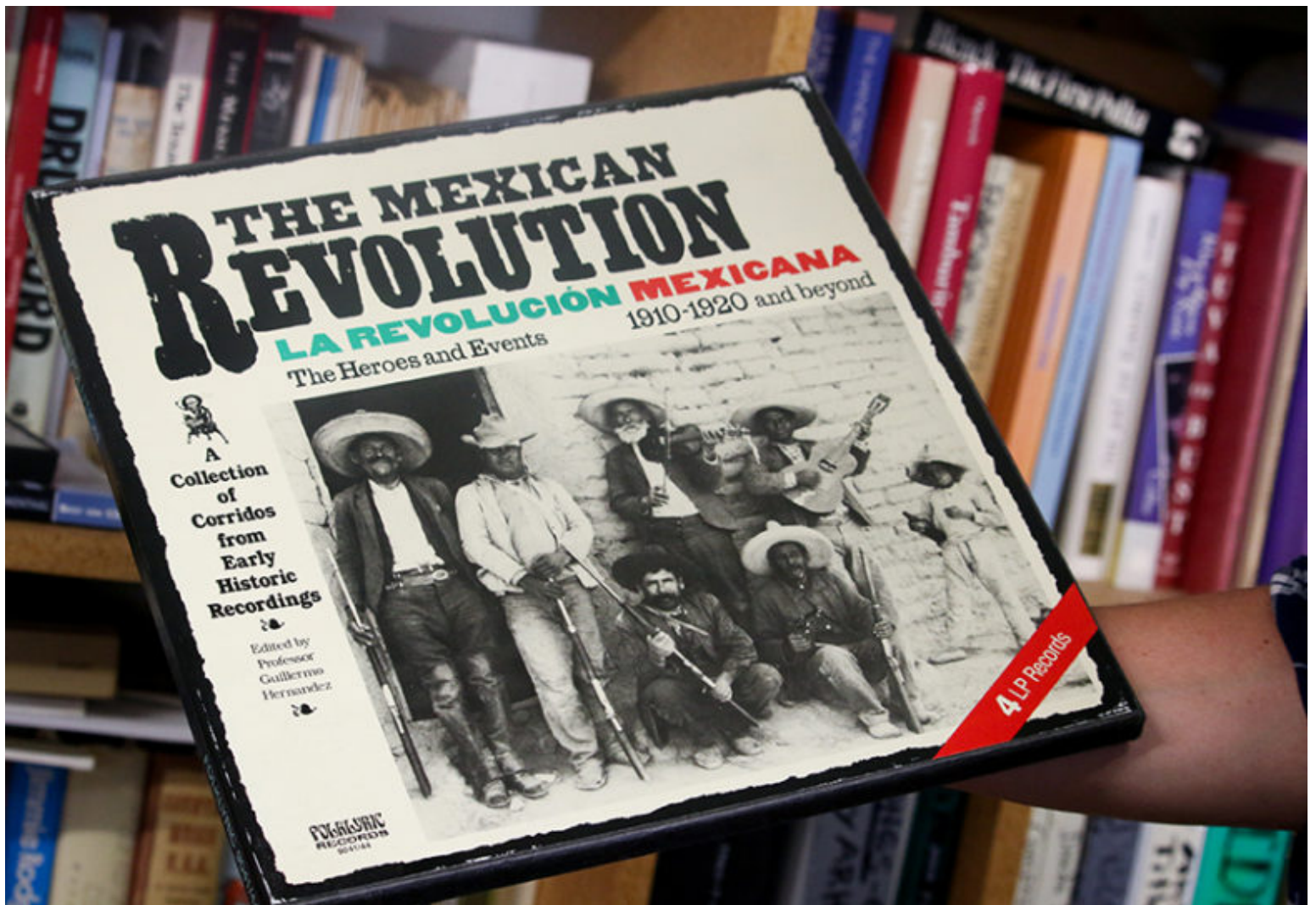
June 18, 2018, Kelly Rodriguez Murillo



*Antonio (Tron) Cuellar browses through the Arhoolie Foundation's Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican-American Recordings, which contains nearly 160,000 recordings. To date, Cuellar has digitized more than 130,000 of those recordings. Photo: Kelly Rodriguez-Murillo*

*Antonio (Tron) Cuellar, longtime Mission resident and sound engineer, has been digitizing the Arhoolie Foundation's Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican-American Recordings at their El Cerrito facilities for 15 years. Photo: Kelly Rodriguez-Murillo*

*Arhoolie Foundation executive director Adam Machado holds a compilation of historic corridos from the Frontera Collection edited by Professor Guillermo Hernandez. Photo: Kelly Rodriguez-Murillo*

*Arhoolie Foundation President and Founder Chris Strachwitz, who acquired the records in the Frontera Collections over the past 55 years, poses for a portrait at their facility in El Cerrito on June 11, 2018. Photo: Kelly Rodriguez-Murillo*

Each record in the Arhoolie Foundation's vast "Frontera Collection," holds a piece of early Mexican or Mexican-American culture. And for the last 15 years, record by record, that history is being immortalized.

The Arhoolie Foundation—a Bay Area nonprofit that preserves and documents regional roots music and its creators—has almost finished the process of digitizing nearly 160,000 recordings of Mexican and Mexican-American music in hopes of preserving and learning more about Mexican/Mexican-American identity. The vinyl records line the walls of the

Arhoolie warehouse in El Cerrito, but Mission residents will have a chance to hear this music first-hand during a DJ-live music event at Acción Latina on June 23.

The recordings were collected by Chris Strachwitz, the 86-year-old German-born board president of the Foundation, who has aptly named it the Frontera Collection. He donated the collection to the Arhoolie Foundation over 20 years ago, and the digitizing of the archive began with grants from the Los Tigres del Norte Foundation.

The renowned Mexican norteña group, Los Tigres del Norte, teamed up with Guillermo Hernández, a UCLA Ethnic Studies professor, who took interest in the history hidden within the records of the Frontera Collection.

Professor Hernandez (who died in 2006) met Strachwitz and his huge collection of Mexican/Mexican-American records, and knew right away that the collection held deep cultural significance.

Hernandez also wanted to use these records for his growing Ethnic Studies classes, as an educational asset. But Hernandez didn't want to have the physical copy, so he asked Strachwitz for digital copies. The equipment and labor to digitize these records was expensive, so Strachwitz convinced Hernandez to start a fundraiser.

Strachwitz suggested that Hernandez contact Los Tigres del Norte, the renowned Mexican norteña group, who were so honored that their music was considered for cultural education reference, that they donated the

funds necessary to begin the digitizing process of music that was similar to theirs.

"Culture is preserved by the arts," said Antonio Cuellar, who is in charge of digitizing all the records and sorting them in their database. "Whether it is paintings, literature or music, you can tell about the history of people with the music they listen to."

Cuellar believes that this collection is especially significant because the records have firsthand experiences of Mexican-Americans' journey to the United States, something that Cuellar says is unique from other ethnic migrant workers.

Strachwitz, who has been collecting records since the 1950s, was always attracted to the stories of the songs.

"I was always that weird gringo, listening to corridos and banda because I loved what they had to say," said Strachwitz. "Mexicans had a very profound way of disclosing their life experiences."

Cuellar believes that Strachwitz's genuine love for corridos is what caused the collection to turn out so successful.

"[Strachwitz's] a non-native, who despite not being able to speak the language, still appreciates and respects the language, I think that's what makes both this collection and [Strachwitz's] so amazing said," said Cuellar.

Songs that date as far back as the 1910s talk about the struggles that Mexican and Mexican-Americans face. Many consider those struggles still relevant today.

"El mojado," sung by the Gaytón, Cantú y Rodriguez, talks about the derogatory term and how the group uses music or their song to reclaim its significance.

Another pattern that still holds relevance today is the division often Latinos make within their own communities, something that Cuellar calls an intellectual conflict.

"There are so many songs of Mexicans criticizing other Mexicans who try too hard to assimilate to the U.S. culture," Cuellar said.

Many of the records are also covers of English songs done entirely in Spanish. At that time, there was a lack of musical representation for Mexican and Mexican-Americans, who yearned to listen to English songs in Spanish.

"Many migrant workers didn't know how to write so singing was all they had to record their life stories and again that's why they genuinely represent the mentality of Mexican-Americans throughout the years, said Cuellar.

The digitization of the collection is nearly complete, as Cuellar estimates he has about 8,000 more songs to go. A challenge that Cuellar is having

however is acquiring background information on the various artists, who in many cases are completely unknown.

The Arhoolie Foundation prioritizes records that aren't known or popular, so everytime the foundation has outreach shows that showcase these records, Cuellar hopes that perhaps their listeners might be able to offer information about the records.

On June 23, The Arhoolie Foundation encourages any vinyl lover or even anyone interested history Chicano history to join them as Cuellar spins records of the sampled Mexican-American ballads.