

★ BOOKS ★

THE CHICANO ARCHIVES, VOLUME 6: THE ARHOOLIE FOUNDATION'S STRACHWITZ FRONTERA COLLECTION OF MEXICAN AND MEXICAN AMERICAN RECORDINGS

Agustín Gurza with Jonathan Clark and Chris Strachwitz (Los Angeles, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2012; distribution: Seattle, University of Washington Press), xiv + 226 pp. ISBN: 978-0-89551-148-5; pb, \$19.95

Invisible behind this large-format (8" x 11.5") paperback is the reason for its existence: the archive described in its (also large-format) title. Nobody else in the roots music and collector world was interested in Mexican-American and Mexican music when Chris Strachwitz started acquiring all the discs – and photographs, posters, catalogues and other ephemera – he could lay his hands on. Buying up radio station and distributor stock, and the inventory of record labels that went out of business, was usually more productive than junking; records that survived in private hands had often been played to death. The Strachwitz Frontera Collection comprises – deep breath – 33,472 performances on 78s, some 50,000 on 45s, 4,000 LPs and 650 cassettes, and is, needless to say, by far the largest archive of this music in existence. Thanks to grants from various foundations, and notably to a share in \$500,000 from regional superstars Los Tigres del Norte, by late 2010 all the 78s and about half the 45s had been digitised, and entered into a database at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. This is accessible via <http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/index.html>, although for copyright reasons only the first 50 seconds of each recording is available to computers off-campus.

The book under review explores some of the possibilities for research enabled by this resource. First, though, there are chapters about Chris Strachwitz and Arhoolie Records, and an account of how the Frontera Collection came into existence, through Chris's encounters with the late Guillermo Hernández, a professor of literature who turned to studying border music and corridos after seeing Les Blank's film, 'Chulas Fronteras', and learning of the existence of Strachwitz's collection. Chris himself contributes a short history of the recording industry, with particular reference to Mexican music.

This is a good place to note that this music (like zydeco and many blues singers) is known about, and documented, in large measure thanks to the efforts of Chris Strachwitz. It's also the place to observe that Mexican and Mexican-American recordings seem, far more than many vernacular discs, concerned with history as experienced from below. Guido van Rijn's series of books about American presidents has shown how blues and gospel music can function as a people's almanac and editorial page; but the corridos and tragedias of the borderlands seem a far more extensive and deliberate attempt to memorialise and comment on events of historical and local importance, and on the pleasures and (more often) hardships of life in Mexico and America. The Frontera Collection offers an almost limitless resource for the study of Mexican-American sociology and history; and, of course, a lot of it is simply wonderful listening.

'A Century of Corridos' responds to Guillermo Hernández's article, 'What Is A Corrido?' (reprinted as an appendix), using recordings in the collection to amplify, and sometimes to take issue with, the characteristics Hernández identified through a study of thirty corridos. There are nearly 4,000 items in the Frontera Collection listed as corridos; some are recordings of the same song by different artists, but this enables fruitful comparison of different versions.

Love, sex and their discontents are nevertheless the most represented topics in the collection, of course, and 'Transcending Machismo' considers the range of responses to love and loss. As the chapter's title implies, it argues, with supporting examples, that there's a lot more to the Mexican male's reaction to being dumped than machismo. It's unfortunate, however, that 'machismo' is nowhere explicitly defined in the discussion. The OED offers 'macho: ostentatiously or notably manly or virile; assertively masculine or tough; producing an impression of manliness or toughness', but Gurza characterises it both more narrowly and more vaguely: 'the macho response – from murderous rage to debauched despair – can certainly be found in these songs...'

'Gringos, Chinos, and Pochos' looks at 'intercultural conflict in Mexican Music', and is commendably honest about the stereotyping of blacks, Gringos and – especially, it seems – Chinese people. Gurza pithily sums up Xavier Cugat's 'Chino Soy': 'it's notable that so much musical thought

can go into a subject so inane'. Needless to say, Mexicans have been and are subjected to racist stereotyping and hostility themselves, from the War of 1846-8, to the zoot suit riots, to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina ('FEMA – Find Every Mexican Available' was one of the jokes going around in New Orleans). 'Pochos' are Mexicans who try to act Anglo; they are the frequent subject of musical mockery and scorn, although 'El Pocho' by Conjunto Hermanos Rojo makes the practical point that hiding one's Mexican identity also hides one from La Migra.

Jonathan Clark, author of 'El Mariachi From Rustic Roots To Golden Era', has worked in mariachi groups as a guitarrón player for many years, and has done as much as anyone alive to research the roots and history of the music that exemplifies Mexican culture for many outsiders. This account of the music's origins and development, with biographies of notable artists, constitutes an immensely valuable section of the book. The final chapter tells the story of major funding contributors Los Tigres del Norte, four brothers and a cousin from a poor village in Mexico who became the biggest stars in the music. Along the way, somewhat to their disquiet, they inadvertently inaugurated the narcocorrido genre with their first, and much-covered big hit, 'Contrabando y Traicion'.

The book concludes with eleven appendices, mostly designed to show ways in which the database can be searched – for music from elsewhere in Latin America, for the 'top ten' (#1 'Cielito Lindo', 147 versions present), for most represented songwriters, genres and performers, and so on. Archivist Antonio Cuéllar (the only person alive who has listened to every 78 in the collection) contributes 'Seventy-Eight Favorite 78s', Jonathan Clark lists 'Forty Notable Mariachi Recordings', and Mister Chris enumerates his 'Fifty Favorite Mexican and Latin Recordings'. These listings may seem like self-indulgence, but in fact they are useful guides, by knowledgeable escorts, to the places where one should look for quality, entertainment and historical significance. I won't say that they're anything as formal as an attempt to define a canon, but that may turn out to be a by-product of the existence of the Frontera Collection, and of its accessibility (albeit in excerpts, and via what seems to be a slow server) worldwide.

The only thing that remains to be mentioned is that the illustrations are wonderful, and that \$19.95 is a remarkable price. This book is a fitting celebration of the achievements of a man who, according to his biography within, 'doesn't speak a lick of Spanish'. (Actually, he speaks enough to phone a Mexican record shop and find out what time it closes; I went there with him shortly afterwards, and bought an Alegres de Terán CD).

Chris Smith

CLASSIC BLUES ARTWORK FROM THE 1920's 2013 CALENDAR (VOL. 10) – (with 21 TRACK CD) Blues Images Volume 10

CD TRACK LISTING (66:58): BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON: Dark Was The Night-Cold Was The Ground; BLIND BLAKE: Diddie Wa Diddie/ Police Dog Blues; MEMPHIS MINNIE: What's The Matter With The Mill?; LIL McCLINTOCK: Sow Good Seeds; BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON: Peach Orchard Mama; BUDDY BOY HAWKINS: Snatch It Back Blues; ARDELL BRAGG: Pig Meat Blues; HARUM SCARUM: Alabama Scratch (Parts 1 & 2); CHARLEY PATTON: Frankie And Albert/ Some These Days I'll Be Gone (Takes 1 & 2); CLIFFORD GIBSON: Ice And Snow Blues; REVEREND EMMET DICKENSON: The Devil And God Meet At Church; BLIND WILLIE DAVIS: I Believe I'll Go Back Home Again/ Trust In God And Do The Right; HI HENRY BROWN: Titanic Blues/ Preacher Blues; LAURA RUCKER WITH BLIND BLAKE: Fancy Tricks; FREDDIE SPRUELL WITH WASHBOARD SAM: Ocean Blues/ Y.M.V. Blues

For the tenth year in a row, Blues Images presents their 'Classic Blues Artwork From The 1920's' calendar with an enclosed CD. This time around, the cover art is particularly graphic with December's Paramount artwork featuring Jesus facing off against Satan, referencing Reverend Dickenson's fiery sermon, 'The Devil And God Meet At Church' while the music on offer is the usual inspired mix of stunningly re-mastered, calendar-reflecting country blues or gospel sides – Blind Willie Johnson's classic 'Dark Was The Night-Cold Was The Ground', whose