

# “Hit Me, Baby!”

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## Oscar Martinez,

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## The Godfather

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## of Tejano Music

by LARRY LANGE

*On October 4, 2012, the Benson Latin American Collection sponsored “El Tejano Enamorado: An Evening of Music and Art with Oscar Martinez” to celebrate and showcase the many talents of the Corpus Christi legend. Musician Larry Lange, who also played with his band Larry Lange and His Lonely Knights that evening, writes below about Oscar’s lifetime contributions to Tejano and Texas music.*

**I**T’S ONE O’CLOCK ON A beautiful spring afternoon in Corpus Christi, Texas, and Oscar Martinez takes to the airwaves for his weekly radio show on KMIQ. The intro song “Voy pa’ Corpus Christi, voy a ver a mi gran amor” jumps to Oscar’s hit and theme song “El Tejano Enamorado.” Con gusto, he voices-over, “Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, aaaaaaay Mambo! Muy buenos tardes, amigos, desde Corpus Christi, Tejas, The Sparkling City by the Sea. Les saluda Oscar Martinez, El Tejano Enamorado. Es un domingo tremendo con la música de las orquestas de Tejas y no los dejan solos, darle shine on Majic 104.9. And give me a big one, honey. Hit it! Hit it! Vamos a tocar ‘Makes No Difference’ con Larry Lange and His Lonely Knights desde Austin, Texas. Esta selection muy bonita ... Vamonos! Let’s go! Hit me, baby! Atta boy, Larry!”

When I recorded “Makes No Difference” in ’08, I had no idea that Oscar had had a regional hit with it in the early ’60s on his own

record label, Impala. I also did not realize that Oscar had translated that song into English from a previous hit, “Que Me Puede Ya Importar,” which was big in South Texas by Balde Gonzalez. See, even though you travel the world, some of the greatest discoveries are just around the corner. At one of my band’s shows a few years ago, a young man came up and said, “You know, that’s an Oscar Martinez song. You want to meet him?” I said, “You betcha. Is he still around?” In a matter of weeks, we arranged to meet in Corpus Christi at the Galvan music store. I entered the store in a flashy outfit and he came in wearing his flashy outfit and said, “Look at this crazy bolillo! Man, you’ve got to be crazy to be doing my songs.”

I’ve been a bandleader for a number of years from the Austin area, and have chosen a repertoire of music from a specific region—that is to say, from San Antonio to New Orleans along the old U.S. Highway 90, around the Louisiana and Texas Gulf Coast down to the Rio Grande Valley. This area is exceedingly rich in a variety of purely American music genres, many of which overlap one another. The Western and Country music of the white working class, Blues and Rhythm and Blues from the back streets of Houston and New Orleans, the Cajun Zydeco sounds from southwest Louisiana, the “Swamp Pop” stylings from southern Louisiana and southeast Texas, the rancheras from the Rio Grande Valley, and then, eventually, the Orquesta music of South Texas, all come from the various ethnic groups who migrated to the area. While these genres had their roots



Oscar prepares to “hit it” in his red coat.

in the nineteenth century, it wasn't until well into the twentieth century that they coalesced. With the rise of technology—radio, recording devices, television, etc.—these musical forms became cemented in the American psyche. And then, of course, rock and roll came along and naturally tapped into all these forms.

I grew up in Victoria, Texas, a small town about 90 miles north of Corpus Christi. This music was as thick as the humidity on a June day on those lower coastal plains. Surrounded by Czech, German, and Mexican Americans, we heard music constantly on car or home radios; some folks had record players. And then, of course, there



A young Oscar Martinez with his trumpet in 1960.

were the honky-tonks, like the famous Westerner Club off Moody Street, which, by the way, is still there and still in the hands of the Villafranca family. The Westerner hosted all kinds of musical ensembles, from Oscar Martinez and Isidro Lopez, to Johnny Horton, Beto Villa, Kitty Wells, The Flying Dutchmen, and Adolph Hofner and His Pearl Wranglers.

Oscar began playing nightclubs like the Westerner and Schroeder Hall, outside Goliad, and the Galvan Ballroom in Corpus Christi, and many others throughout the region—Karnes City, Beeville, Bishop, Houston, and Harlingen in the 1950s. He developed a keen sense of what his audiences wanted. They wanted what they heard on the regional radio stations, which played a mix of Anglo and Mexican music—rancheras, polkas, boleros, and rock and roll. The audiences at the higher paying jobs wanted more than that—they wanted orquesta music. The blending of these styles would lead to the birth of Tejano music.

As Mexican Americans left Texas for the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific, they were exposed to the Big Band sounds of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, and others played by the soldiers drafted into the military. They returned home to the traditional rancheras and corridos but craved the Big Band arrangements. In 1950, high school student Oscar Martinez was beginning his love affair with big band orchestration thanks to Corpus Christi's Galvan Orchestra. The Galvan family opened the Galvan Ballroom above

their music store in 1947 and the opening night act was the famous Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. The Beto Villa, Johnny Herrera, Balde Gonzalez, and Galvan orchestras were using piano, saxophones, trumpets, guitar, bass, and drums to perform traditional Mexican polkas and waltzes. What followed, according to Oscar, was the birth of the Tejano music movement.

In 1952, Isidro Lopez would become a rising star with compositions such as "El Nuevo Contrato," "Emoción Pasajera," and many others. Oscar would join his band in 1954 and together they would define the new Tejano sound. One of Oscar's compositions recorded by Lopez's band at that time, "Tu Sabes Que Te Quiero," would enjoy much airplay in South Texas. Oscar left Lopez's band in 1958 to start his own group, but they would maintain a working relationship throughout the years.

In Oscar's self-published book, *Tejano Music Talk*, he describes this transition period. "Thereupon my band hit the road with bookings. There was a very popular announcer on radio station KCCT in Corpus Christi; his name was Mr. Jose Torres Gonzales, 'El Eco de México.' His one-hour show would stretch into four hours. He would ad-lib his spots and commercials, and he especially assisted in promoting my band. Our band played consistently and then, in 1965, I came up with my most noted recording, 'El Tejano Enamorado' with the supervision of my former music teacher, Mr. Johnny Herrera, who had his own band. Mr. Herrera used his grand piano to assist me and in the process disciplined me in every way possible. He taught me how to make meticulous changes to refine this song. Isidro Lopez and his band needed a song to be included on the B-side of their record. Why not? Isidro Lopez was my amigo and a renowned artist and could pull more than me at the moment. Why did I entitle my song 'El Tejano Enamorado?' Because I am from this beautiful State of Texas and I was focused on the trend for a special identity. This song went on to be recorded by many prominent Tejano artists, such as Rudy and the Reno-Bops, Little Joe Hernandez, Jimmy Edwards, Latin Breed, David Lee Garza y Los Musicales, Joe Bravo, Jay Perez, Ram Herrera, Gilbert Rodriguez and the Blue Notes, Ramon Ayala y Los Bravos Del Norte and several dozen others."

For the next couple of decades, Oscar continued to travel and entertain audiences at dances all over the region. Always creative, he would come up with new projects besides being a bandleader: starting a couple of record labels; his own line of hair grooming products for men; and the aforementioned book written with his daughter, Iris Martinez-Simmons. Oscar wrote *Tejano Music Talk* because he was concerned that the compositions by other Tejano artists would be lost in time, as most of the musicians did not have the training to put their arrangements into sheet music form. He hand-produced arrangements and put these songs into sheet music so that these compositions by others will live on.

His daughter, Iris, always encouraged him to pursue his artistic talents. Several years ago, she noticed that her father had started drawing caricatures of local musicians and people he met in daily life. Paintings would be scattered haphazardly around his house. She would gather them up and take them home with her. Iris decided to reproduce them on quality paper and sell them at shows. Many people responded enthusiastically saying, "This is



One of Oscar's art pieces from 2010.

real folk art," and commissioned paintings for themselves. Oscar will paint on anything: a lovely lady on Grady Pinkerton's guitar case, scenes of Corpus Christi on Iris's skirt, and a self-portrait on his suitcase when he accompanied my band for some California shows. Oscar has had several exhibits recently, including one at the Benson Latin American Collection and another at the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (both in Austin). A new documentary has been produced, *Oscar Martinez, The Man and His Music*. Oscar continues to paint and perform in the region.

In 1960, at the Pleasure Island swimming pool next to the Club Westerner in Victoria, I would hang on the chain-link fence watching as three Chevrolet station wagons arrived at the club. The men would get out, stretch, gather their instrument cases, and turn to look at me and wave. I would wave back. And somehow, I know one of those men was Oscar Martinez. ✨

*Larry Lange is a longtime Austin musician, bandleader, and fan of Oscar Martinez.*