

REGIONAL RAMBLINGS: Strachwitz Frontera Collection

Eduardo Martinez | Posted: Friday, February 8, 2013 9:00 am

Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recording by the Arhoolie Foundation feels like reading several volumes of books on the history of Mexican and Mexican-American music. Not only does it touch on border music, it goes on to educate you about music from deep within Mexico and other Latin American regions like Cuba and Puerto Rico. This is a magnificent piece of work that was written by former Los Angeles Times writer Agustín Gurza. But Gurza wasn't alone here, other areas in the book also had some great pieces by other writers (more on that later).

To those that don't know about the *Strachwitz Frontera Collection*, I'll let the book cover this:

“The *Strachwitz Frontera Collection* is the largest repository of commercially produced Mexican and Mexican-American vernacular recordings in existence. It contains more than 130,000 individual recordings.”

This book goes on to give a wonderful, analytical overview of the music in this epic collection. There are certain people who look down their noses at any Spanish music. Some of those people have a bizarre idea that it all sounds the same. It's a weird myth that even really educated music fans will utter when dismissing countless genres of music. This book shatters that ridiculous myth, obliterating it with detailed breakdowns on what makes a corrido, the differences of various regional groups, the panoply of themes covered in songs, “intercultural conflict” and more. So much more. For example, even a corrido that covers the same subject can be a radically different experience depending on the region it comes from due to local dialects, regional aesthetics, etc. The serious academic way this book deals with corridos, treating it as a subject worth investigating, is reason enough to get this book. While that might sound like serious business, it's also a joyous celebration.

As mentioned earlier, this book also features other writers. The writing from Jonathan Clark discusses the origins of mariachis and the path they took. Along with that, Clark also covers the most significant individuals that played a role in mariachi music. Another writer that is highlighted in the book is the great, late Guillermo Hernández. His work on corrido music is a treasure to anyone interested in the subject. Also Mr. Arhoolie himself, Chris Strachwitz wrote a neat chapter that details not only his own, invaluable history of recording regional music, but he even goes on to briefly describe the very history of the record business itself.

One of the most fun aspects of the book is the lists it features. The three key lists I'm talking about are by Antonio Cuéllar (archivist who has listened to every 78 in the Frontera Collection), Strachwitz and Clark. The most valuable types of lists are those that come from individuals with unique stylistic preferences. When it comes from that mindset, you're going to be introduced to something that you normally wouldn't know of. Thanks to Cuéllar, I learned about many curious gems, some of which blew my mind.

One such example is titled “El Tirili,” a crazy jazzy 1940’s Chicano number using caló slang about “el zacatito” (weed). The list by Strachwitz is a great love letter to the music he cherishes (a list that includes plenty of South Texas acts like Los Donneños, Narciso Martinez, Freddy Fender and more). Finally, Clark’s list is the list to look at for anyone that seriously wants to know about mariachi music. These are three legitimately valuable lists for exploring music.

It’s almost overwhelming to review a book such as this. There is genuinely so much information that simply could not be covered in one simple review. Everyone that took part in putting together this book and preserving this music deserves a standing ovation.

You can purchase the *Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings* at Arhoolie.com or Amazon.com.

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