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SOUND OF THE CITY ; 'El Parche' part of new TexPop exhibit

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At South Texas Popular Culture Center this weekend - and around the world, as far as Flaco Jimenez; his recently honored brother, Santigago Jimenez Jr.; and all those who love the instrument are concerned - the accordion means "friendship."

A new TexPop exhibit, "Accordion Amistad: The Instrument That Bridges Cultures," celebrates the instrument and the San Antonio musical heroes who exported conjunto, norteño, Tex-Mex and Tejano. It runs through mid-November.

"It's a party instrument," said Flaco Jimenez about the diatonic button-accordions played by conjunto artists. His grandfather's and father's playing was influenced by 19th and 20th century Polish, Swiss, Czech and German polka musicians.

Of course, no TexPop photo, poster and vinyl-record exhibit (this one even features some of the garish outfits worn by Esteban "Steve" Jordan) is complete without a live-music component.

On Sunday afternoon, Miss Neesie & the Ear Food Orchestra, led by former Express-News music columnist Jim Beal Jr. and his wife, singer Neesie Beal, go into full zydeco and Cajun accordion mode at its TexPop gig.

The music runs from 3 to 5 p.m.

Jordan's colorful stage costumes are the hit of the exhibit, a real coup. Jordan, who died at 71 on Aug. 13, 2010 from complications of liver cancer, took great pride in his onstage presentation. The display includes the outfit "El Parche" wore the last time he played the Tejano Conjunto Festival at Rosedale Park in 2009.

"He's the only one that can rock that kind of style," said son Ricardo Jordan, who plays in Rio Jordan with his brother, Steve Jordan III.

"It fit his character. He was made for that, and that's what I miss the most. I miss watching him wear those outfits. I hadn't seen them in a long time because my brother had them. When he started bringing all that stuff out, whew, it brought back some good times."

Bonifacio "Boni" Jordan, one of Esteban's younger brothers and an original member of the R&B family act Los Hermanos Jordan, recalled his legendary brother's flair for unusual fashion.

"That was his thing," said Bonifacio Jordan, 75, who crafted a couple of leather vests for his older brother, whose outlaw image was akin to a conjunto Keith Richards.

"He was (influenced) by the time of the pirates, and the ruffled shirts. That was his thing from the beginning. He was always kind of bright. He wouldn't wear nothing normal. People saw him as an artist. Not anybody would wear that. He wouldn't play without his patch. It was a part of him. All those suits were, like, part of him."

Steve Jordan III acknowledged that his iconoclastic dad would be pleased to be included in the exhibit, especially for his mix 'n' match fashion style. "It always looked hip and cool," he said. "My dad, he loved the threads. You get an idea of who my dad was."

Chicano music historian, musicologist and collector **Ramon** Hernandez, a photojournalist and owner of the Hispanic Research Archives, said the current TexPop exhibit (which is displaying some of his photographs) is particularly important.

"We are the segment of Americans that never get any museum space or recognition," said Hernandez, 75, who curated the current Emilio Navaira exhibit at Texas State University.

"You never really see anything on Latinos. This gives us a sense of pride, that we're finally a part of America. That we're finally a part of the United States. We've been neglected and overlooked, 'the Mexican-American artist is, like, no big deal.' But I get off on it. I've been to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twice. To see something they personally wore, and it's right there before your eyes, that's a thrill. It's a high. It's very important."

For example, one of the photos Hernandez contributed was of a teenage Valerio Longoria with a drummer forgotten to history named Mario **Vasquez**. Longoria was the first conjunto accordionist to incorporate a drummer into the folkloric music in a group called Trio Acapulco.

The alegre (happy) sound is distinctive to the button-style accordions. Piano accordions are more closely associated with sweeter, romantic sounds, as well as symphonic tones. ("The instrument itself doesn't have that happy, yelling sound like a button accordion," explained Flaco Jimenez.)

Santiago Jimenez Jr., who last month was among the recipients of National Medal of Arts Awards at the White House, has memories of his father, the pioneering musician and songwriter, listening to German polkas, 78 rpm records on the family Victrola and "on the oom-pah-pah radio stations in New Braunfels at night."

"It was the old style," Santiago Jimenez said.

Flaco Jimenez, 77, traces it back even farther to when his grandfather, Patricio Jimenez, would go see the German bands in New Braunfels. He then learned the polkas and waltzes on a one-row button accordion.

At home, the radio was always tuned to KGNB in New Braunfels.

"I did the same when I was a young kid," said Flaco Jimenez. "It was polka music all day long. It was the accordion music of that time. My dad's (playing) had the feel of the German sound, but then he created his style, a happy sound, less like a military march. But the Germans had their happiness, too."

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