

# W A S T I N C I T Y C O U N C I L

## AGENDA



Thursday, May 25, 2006

 Back

### Parks and Recreation RECOMMENDATION FOR COUNCIL ACTION

**Subject:** Approve naming of the Fiesta Gardens East Meeting Hall, located at 2101 Bergman Street, as the "Manuel 'Cowboy' Donley Meeting Hall at Fiesta Gardens." (Related to item 11, 18 and 20-22)

**Fiscal Note:** There is no unanticipated fiscal impact. A fiscal note is not required.

#### Additional Backup Material

(click to open)

☐ Manuel Cowboy Donley  
Supporting Documents

#### For More Information:

**Boards and Commission Action:** Recommended by the  
Parks and Recreation Board.

The Parks and Recreation Department received a request on January 26th, 2006 to name the meeting hall for Manuel "Cowboy" Donley. The City of Austin Public Information Office began the official process for nominations to name the facility in February, 2006. The deadline for submitting nominations was March 17, 2006. Only one application was received: 1) "Manuel 'Cowboy' Donley Meeting Hall" by John Michael Cortez & Isidoro Lopez, Board of Directors of Austin Latino Music Association. The Parks and Recreation Board met on April 25, 2006 and recommended the meeting hall be named "Manuel 'Cowboy' Donley Meeting Hall at Fiesta Gardens." The vote was 6-0. The Fiesta Gardens East Meeting Hall recommended to be named for Manuel "Cowboy" Donley is one facility out of a series being recommended to celebrate a trail for Tejano Music Legends.

The Fiesta Gardens East Meeting Hall is a popular rental facility located in east Austin on Bergman Street adjacent to the Fiesta Gardens pavilion and Little League ballfields.

## **APPLICATION FOR FACILITY NAMING**

We, John-Michael Cortez and Isidoro Lopez, members of the board of directors of the Austin Latino Music Association (ALMA), request that the names listed below be considered for the corresponding public facilities:

(A) Name the Mexican American Cultural Center located at 600 River St. for the Perez and Ramos Families that include among them the band leaders Ruben Ramos, Alfonso Ramos, Ruben Perez and Ernest Perez.

(B) Re-name Festival Beach Road located just North of Town Lake and just East of I-35 for the band leader Nash Hernandez.

(C) Name the Fiesta Gardens Pavilion located near the Western boundary of Fiesta Gardens at 1901 Bergman St. for the band leader Johnny Degollado.

(D) Name the Fiesta Gardens East Meeting Hall located at 2101 Bergman St. for the band leader Manuel "Cowboy" Donley.

(E) Name the Town Lake Scenic Overlook located near the intersection of Canterbury St. and Pleasant Valley Road for the band leader Roy Montelongo.

(F) Name the Medina St. Plaza to be built on the Medina right-of-way located between E. 5<sup>th</sup> St. and E. 6<sup>th</sup> St. and South of the alley for business and civic leader Roy Velasquez and band leader Matt Velasquez. Roy and Matt Velasquez are brothers.

Ruben Ramos, Alfonso Ramos, Johnny Degollado, Manuel "Cowboy" Donley and Roy Montelongo have all been inducted into the Tejano Music Hall of Fame. The Nash Hernandez Orchestra is the longest running big band in Austin and has been performing in Austin for more than 50 years. Matt Velasquez is a 50's era band leader, and his brother Roy Velasquez was the founder of Roy's Taxi, the only Latino-owned taxi cab company in Austin.

**Biographical Synopsis:** Refer to Attachment 1

**Individual's Involvement in the Community:** With the exception of Roy Velasquez, the individuals whose names are being recommended for naming the noted public facilities are important Latino musicians and families in Austin who helped establish Austin as the Live Music Capitol of the World. Roy Velasquez was a local entrepreneur and civic leader who helped establish the Austin Chapter of LULAC in 1935 and very active in local politics.

Please refer to Attachment 2(A) – 2(F) for additional information about the families and individuals for whom the specified facilities are proposed to be named.

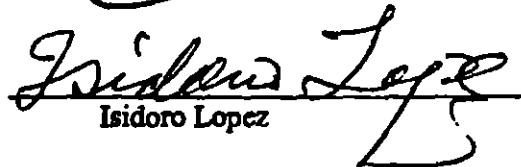
- 2(A) Perez & Ramos Families
- 2(B) Nash Hernandez
- 2(C) Johnny Degollado
- 2(D) Manuel "Cowboy" Donley
- 2(E) Roy Montelongo
- 2(F) Roy & Matt Velasquez

**Individual's Connection to the Facility:** Ruben Ramos, Alfonso Ramos, Ruben Perez, Ernest Perez, Manuel "Cowboy" Donley, Roy Montelongo, Nash Hernandez, Roy Velasquez and Matt Velasquez all lived in central East Austin where all of the proposed facilities to be named are located. Several of these artists still live in that area. Johnny Degollado has lived in the Montopolis community/neighborhood all his life and has hosted the Austin Conjunto Festival at Fiesta Gardens for more than 10 years. Roy Velasquez established Roy's Taxi in the early 1930's and for many years operated his business on the block adjacent to the proposed Medina St. Plaza.

ALMA will work to identify funding for signs and plaques if it is deemed necessary by the City of Austin.

Submitted to the Parks and Recreation Department this <sup>26<sup>th</sup></sup> ~~25<sup>th</sup>~~ day of January, 2006.

  
John-Michael Cortez

  
Isidoro Lopez

## **ATTACHMENT 1**

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS FOR FACILITY NAMING PROPOSAL**

### **(A) PEREZ-RAMOS FAMILIES**

The Perez - Ramos Families have a long musical tradition that stretches back several generations. The two families are connected by brothers Don Louis Perez and Don Tranquilino Perez. Don Louis Perez and his wife Trinidad are the parents of Elvira Perez who is the mother of Ruben Ramos and Alfonso Ramos. Don Tranquilino Perez and his wife Carolina are the parents of Blas Perez who is the father of Ernest Perez and Ruben Perez.

Ruben Ramos, Alfonso Ramos, Ruben Perez and Ernest Perez have all led their own Tejano orchestras. Ruben and Alfonso have often performed and recorded together. Many of Ruben and Alfonso's brothers were and continue to be members of their musical groups. In recognition of their accomplishment, Ruben Ramos and Alfonso Ramos have both been inducted into the Tejano Music Hall of Fame. As a member of Los Super Seven, Ruben Ramos is a grammy award winner.

Accomplished local musicians such as Alfonso Ramos and Manuel "Cowboy" Donley played with the Ruben Perez Orchestra early in their careers. In addition to leading his own orchestra, Ernest played in his brother's orchestra for many years as well as other local groups such as Johnny Degollado and Los Cinco Reyes.

### **(B) NASH HERNANDEZ**

The Nash Hernandez Orchestra, Austin's longest running big band, has been playing big band, swing and Latino styles of music for generations of fans throughout Central Texas. Nash Hernandez fell in love with the big band style while in the Army during World War II. When he returned to Austin, he worked with Matt Velasquez before starting his own band in 1949. In 1975, Nash Hernandez was named Ambassador of Goodwill by Governor Dolph Brisco for whom he had performed in 1973 at the Governor's Inaugural Ball. He was also recognized for his musical contributions by the City of Austin in 1975 and 1993, by the Texas Senate in 1993 and by Vice President Al Gore in 1994. Nash Hernandez passed away on June 26, 1994, but the band continues to perform under the direction of Nash's son, drummer Ruben Hernandez, who began playing with the group at the age of eleven.

### **(C) JOHNNY DEGOLLADO**

Johnny Degollado is the premier conjunto accordionist, band leader, and song writer in Austin and the surrounding areas. In 1952, at the age of 15, he started his own conjunto along with his neighbor, Vicente Alonzo, who still is a member of the conjunto. Johnny studied under Camilo Cantu, another important conjunto band leader from the Austin area. Cantu also taught Johnny to tune and repair accordions. Johnny has composed more than 200 songs, and he is the event coordinator for the Austin Conjunto Festival that has been held in May for the last 20 years. He was inducted into the Tejano Music Hall of Fame in 1986.

#### **(D) MANUEL "COWBOY" DONLEY**

Manuel Donley is considered a pioneer of Tejano music. An accomplished musician, arranger and composer, Manuel Donley is well respected by his musical peers. In addition to fronting a Tejano orquesta, he also performs in traditional "Trio" and "Mariachi" ensembles. Manuel Donley has also composed and performed for movie soundtracks. He has taught guitar lessons at Huston-Tillotson College and still gives lessons at his home. His orquesta, Las Estrellas, is famous for its tight horn section as well as for the many different styles of music they played such as boleros, rancheras, polkas, rock-n-roll, rhythm-and-blues, big band-swing, etc. Manuel Donley formed his orquesta in 1949 and continues to perform with them occasionally.

#### **(E) ROY MONTELONGO**

Roy Montelongo is an original Tejano legend who started playing in his teens with the legendary orquesta of Beto Villa. He then went on to play with the orquestas of Isidro Lopez and Alfonso Ramos before forming his own band. One of his first picks for a sideman was Agustine Ramirez. Roy Montelongo recorded many hits and toured nationally. His unique singing style and his accomplishments as a saxophonist and arranger brought him much acclaim. Roy Montelongo recorded over 20 albums and was selected to be an original member of "The Legends" of Tejano music along with the likes of Freddie Martinez and Sunny Ozuna. Eventually, he settled on broadcasting as a career and for many years was heard on the Austin airwaves.

#### **(F) ROY & MATT VELASQUEZ**

Matt Velasquez' Latinaires, that pre-dated Little Joe's Latinaires by several years, performed from approximately 1946 to 1959. Vocalist-guitarist Matt Velasquez was a member of several ballroom bands including "Big Poppa's Band," the group with which he started playing when he was 14 years old. After returning from the service in 1946, he formed his own band, playing sorority parties, debutante balls and major parties. He also donated services to all Catholic churches. Matt Velasquez and his band played for the grand opening of Palmer Auditorium in 1959. He worked with Eduardo Martinez and Emilio Caceres. His brother, James Velasquez, played drums.

Roy Velasquez is an important local Hispanic businessman and community leader. He established Roy's Taxi in 1931 at the age of 21 when construction jobs dried up in the years following the great depression. He started the business with one car and within a year had 35 cars working for him on a contract basis. The company was located in various locations in and around East Austin, but in 1957 he moved the company to 90 East Avenue where the business headquarters remain today. Roy was active in political circles since his early years in business. He sold the poll tax to help minorities gain a voice in government. He also was active in supporting many political candidates and was a friend of leaders such as President Lyndon B. Johnson, Mayor Tom Miller, City Council Member Emma Long, Judge Homer Thornberry, and Congressman Jake Pickle. In 1935, Roy was co-founder of the Austin Chapter of LULAC, Council 85 and was one of the charter members of the Austin Citizen's League which was organized in the mid-1960's.

## **ATTACHMENT 2(D)**

**Manuel “Cowboy” Donley**

## **MANUEL DONLEY**

**Manuel "Cowboy" Donley has had a career for over fifty years of performing and recording around Austin. Born in Mexico on July 26, 1928, he moved to Austin in 1939. He began playing guitar as a youth and by the time he was eighteen he was drawing good crowds. In 1956 he formed his band Las Estrellas a loud, rocking Orquesta. That same year he cut his first record with Valmon and began a recording career that has included recordings on Torrero, Ideal, Disco Grande, Corona, Nopal, Crescent, Rosina, Serape, and Estrella. His musical inspirations include Little Richard, Fats Domino and Elvis Presley. Because of his love of rhythm and blues and rock and roll, Cowboy's sound includes a fusion of Orquesta and the new sounds he was hearing. He started in the clubs on Austin's Sixth Street at places such as the Green Spot, El Gato Negro, Las Fuentes, and the Austin Bar eventually playing at large dance halls like Avalon, Skyline, Dessau, or the City Coliseum. The band also played country songs, and because he fronted the band and played electric guitar, he got the nickname "Cowboy," by which he became known. He is also recognized as a talented composer having written the classics, "Porque Me Dudas" and "Adios Chiquita" which have been recorded by many other artists. In 1976 he and his orquesta performed at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. In addition to other festivals, he has continued to work out of Austin, playing regularly at Alejandro's and the Pan-American Club. His band consists of Alex Ramirez and Eduardo Coronado on trumpets, Jerry Silva and Martin Rios on saxophones, drummer Roy Roceza, and Cowboy's sons, Lupe on keyboards and vocals and Phillip on bass.**

**Biography Courtesy of  
Texas Music Museum**



# **Legendary Tejano Musician Manuel "Cowboy" Donley Releases First Recording in 20 Years**

By Bertanda Palameros



Manuel "Cowboy" Donley began his musical career more than 50 years ago in Austin. The Tejano composer and performer who is credited with setting standards for the local Tejano sound continues to perform but stopped recording in 1978. Twenty years after his last recording, Donley is back with a new CD entitled, "Exitos de Ayer y Hoy," on his new label, Mini Records.

Music has always been a part of Donley's life. Born in Durango, Mexico, Donley came to Austin at age seven. It was about this time that he picked up his first guitar.

Although his father, Ramon was an accomplished violinist who had previously played with the Durango Symphony, the younger Donley was basically self-taught. Donley did spend many afternoons in his father's East Sixth Street barber-shop listening to the elders fiddle out old German polkas. This, Donley said, is where he received most of his musical education.

Donley began playing professionally in 1949, when he formed his group, Los Heartbreakers. The group played mostly rock and roll and anywhere it could including popular Sixth Street hangouts such as Rio Rita, Las Cuatro Copas, El Gato Negro, 609 Bar, Brazos Bar and the Austin Bar. "Back then there were not that many Mexicanos performing. There were no formalities. Sixth Street was unpredictable. If they would hire us, we would play," Donley said.

Donley started his orchestra, Las Estrellas in 1955. By that time, he had begun incorporating Mexican music, including boleros into his repertoire. By blending all his musical influences—rock and roll, jazz, rhythm and blues, the Big

Continued on Page 22

Continued from Page 2 - Manuel "Cowboy" Donley

is a sound, as well as his own style. Because Donley reached the peak of his career in the 1960's, a younger generation of Tejano music aficionados may not even know him. Yet the impact of his musical contributions continues in much of the local Tejano music currently being produced by younger artists. In addition to influencing and mentoring artists, Donley has also arranged music for the movie, "Remember the Alamo," written by Austin Jane Bowers. He was also the music director and composer for the movie, "Porfirio Salinas: A Boy Born to Paint," and the documentaries, "Los Mineros," and "Los Inmigrantes."

All this, combined with Donley's intricate musical arrangements for all the orchestra instruments, began to have a profound influence on the local Tejano music scene.

Donley recorded his first Tejano hit, "Luvia en mi Corazon," in 1955 on the Crescent label. Of his original compositions, Roy Montelongo recorded "Actos Chiquita" and Little Joe y La Familia recorded "Porque Me Dudas." Homer Salinas, Fred Salas, Luis Guerrero, Fernando Villarreal, Roy Montelongo, Nash Hernandez, Edward Coronado, and Manny Estrada all played with, and learned from Manuel "Cowboy" Donley.

A pioneer and innovator, Donley was recognized for his musical contributions when he was inducted into the Tejano Music Hall of Fame in 1986. He was the first performer from Austin to receive this honor. Donley is a professional musician whose talent for arranging music for entire orchestras is considered unprecedented by many fellow musicians.

Donley's new CD, "Exitos de Ayer y Hoy," is a salute to the talent and contribution of this legendary Tejano artist. The CD is available at Maldonado's Record Shop and Turntable Records or by calling Luis Zapata at 320-9922.



## Beautiful Songs and Good, Heavy Sounds

THE AUSTIN  
CHRONICLE

By Belinda Acosta

NOVEMBER 30, 1998: There are people who remember when Sixth Street was Mexican. Before the *calle ancho* (I-35) appeared, and even some time after, the Sixth Street that was Mexican didn't end at San Marcos street. It continued west through Sabine, Red River, Neches, Trinity and San Jacinto, ending at Brazos street. Today's Sixth Street is what tourists and college kids "do." It's a pulse point for South by Southwest, Halloween, and New Year's Eve street parties, and where UT football fans converge to celebrate victories or drown their defeats. But when Sixth Street was Mexican, it was different.

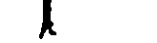
**MUSIC** Though its existence was as much the result of segregation and containment as necessity, it was also a vital hub of social activity, where *gente* who worked as porters, dishwashers, bus boys, and maids, along with field workers from Taylor, Bastrop, Manor, and other outlying areas converged on Sixth Street every weekend to take care of business. The *señores* would have a drink or two (or three) in a cantina, get a haircut, buy a tool, a new shirt, or a pair of shoes. The *señoras* went shopping at Piggly-Wiggly on the corner of Sixth and Red River for the week or the month, depending on how much there was to spend and how long it had to last. Children tagged along, eavesdropping on adult talk, or escaped in search of their own fun. Young people came to Sixth Street to check out the scene and each other, and the old people watched it all over coffee and *pan dulce*.

When Sixth Street was Mexican, nightfall didn't put it to sleep. Clubs like Los Cuatro Copas, El Gato Negro, Blue Sky, Dante's Palladium, the 609 Bar, the Brazos Bar, the Austin Bar, and Rio Rita were havens for people who worked hard during the week and came to Sixth Street at night to relax, drink, dance, and listen to music.

"This street was the mecca of *orquesta* in Texas, right here in Austin, Texas," says Manuel "Cowboy" Donley, nodding toward the present-day Sixth Street outside the Hernandez Cafe near Sixth and Waller. "We'd have musicians -- good musicians -- come from all over: Houston, San Antonio, Corpus. Back then, it was songs, beautiful songs, and good, heavy, original sounds."

For Donley, "back then" means the Forties and Fifties, and when he says the musicians were good, he should know. He was one of them. A composer, arranger, and performer, Donley is considered a pioneer of Tejano music, the

weekly  
WIRE



hybrid of American pop forms like big band and rock & roll, with traditional Mexican conjunto. While he does not have the mainstream recognition of Tejano musicians like Little Joe Hernandez, Ruben Ramos, or Freddie Fender, one thing is clear: The Sixth Street of Donley's youth -- now situated as the Eastside of Austin -- has never forgotten him. When the dapper 70-year-old musician entered the Hernandez Cafe for this interview, he was greeted with friendly nods and handshakes, and addressed with the ultimate of sign of respect: *Maestro*.

Donley was born in Durango, Mexico in 1928. He moved to Austin with his family at the age of seven. He took an early interest in music, following the lead of his father, a classically trained violinist who once played with the Durango Symphony. By day, Donley's father was a barber, but at night, he led his band, La Orquesta de Ramon Donley. The young Donley began his apprenticeship as a musician hanging out in his father's barbershop, where musicians were as likely to come by for a haircut as they were to break out a fiddle or accordion for a couple of tunes. By the time he was 11, Donley had taught himself how to play the guitar and later, the *requinto* (a type of six-string guitar). At 17, Manuel and his brother Robert were playing informally for church festivals and street fairs.



"It was usually, 'Hey, you want to play? You know this song? Okay, okay, let's do it,'" chuckles Donley.

In 1949, the 21-year-old Donley formed Los Heartbreakers, the first Mexican-American band to play rock & roll and rhythm & blues in Austin. They played all the Sixth Street clubs and at Parque Zaragoza, a popular venue for the biggest Mexican-American bands of the day. But it was the *orquesta* music of the early Forties that captured Donley and led him in 1955 to form his own *orquesta*, Las Estrellas.

Not content to simply reproduce what had been done before, Las Estrellas infused Mexican rancheras, polkas, boleros, and ballads with expressive horn arrangements, influences such as big band, rock & roll, and rhythm & blues obvious in the band's music. It was during the early days of Las Estrellas that Donley earned the nickname, "Cowboy," given for his performance style of standing near the front of the stage like country & western singers, instead of sitting behind a music stand. On the surface, the gesture seemed innocuous, but it turned out to be a symbolic breakdown of the barrier between "high" class and "low" class.

"You cannot underestimate what that did," says Isidoro López, a longtime Austin-area DJ. "That [performance] style made it more loose, made [Las Estrellas] more accessible to the public. It also helped break the stereotype of *orquesta* music being rigid. You have to remember, we were all working

people, blue collar workers — it was a question of attitude and perception. Manuel and others before him took the best of both worlds: the sophistication of *orquesta* and the enthusiasm of conjunto. The result is Tejano."

The original Las Estrellas were six, including Rudy Sánchez, Joe Sánchez, Andrew Zuniga, Emilio Villegas, Mike Amaro, and Donley. Like many Tejano musicians, they were all self-taught, with one important difference: They knew how to read music. As the group's arranger, Donley taught himself to write music.

"We forced ourselves to learn how to read and write," says Donley, "in an impressive way, you know, so we could attract good musicians. There were guys coming through who played with Stan Kenton, Harry James, Pérez Prado, Luis Alcaraz -- guys involved in world-wide *orquesta*. Also, there were a lot of music majors at UT, good readers, good musicians from all over the country. Horn players were in abundance. At times, I had *gringos* and some blacks sitting in with us, good musicians from all over the country who could cut it."

Eventually, Las Estrellas grew to 12 musicians with four trumpets and four saxophones. Fred Salas of San Antonio ("he was a genius"), Luis Guerrero, Fernando Villareal, Roy Montelongo, Nash Hernandez, Edward Coronado, Manny Guerra, and Homer Salinas were a few of the prominent musicians who played with Las Estrellas.

"That's one of the things about the band," says Leon Hernandez, owner of the Hernandez Cafe and a longtime friend and admirer of Donley. "There would be a lot of musicians that Manuel would bring in, break them in, and then they'd go play with other groups or start their own bands."

Donley expresses no hard feelings for this fact of music life. One thing that becomes clear when talking with Donley is that he's apt to praise the accomplishments of the musicians he's worked with more than his own. This is not so much humility, it seems, but a devout appreciation for fine musicians and the music they make, along with a sense of accomplishment for having worked with them.

"Homer [Salinas] had two degrees in music, but was a UT law student when he played with me," Donley recalls. "He played with Luis Alcaraz, and did some recording with him, and even sat in with Stan Kenton and Harry James."

Salinas was the soloist in the Pérez Prado 1955 instrumental, "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White."

"With Homer Salinas, it became a big, big hit. Now, it's a classic."

Attracting talented musicians to Las Estrellas encouraged Donley to write arrangements that featured their talents, and in doing so, demonstrated his own talent for creating complex harmonies for several horns, guitar, bass, and

other instruments as needed.

"I wrote dozens and dozens and dozens, maybe even a hundred arrangements," Donley estimates. When asked just how many instruments he can play, he's characteristically self-effacing.

"Real good? I don't play any!"

He laughs.

"No, I guess you can say I know the fingerboard of just about every instrument. I have to know the depth of an instrument as an arranger. I have to know the trombone, how it sounds where I want it to sound, and the flutes, the clarinets, the altos, your trumpets and treble horn. When you do orchestration, that's something you have to learn. And then the guitar itself, it has such a wide range."

San Antonio musician Fred Salas played with Las Estrellas for three years, and is another of the musicians Donley regards as one of the most talented with whom he has worked.

"He would come to my house and we would hang around and then I'd catch him with all my arrangements spread out on the floor, and he said, 'Some people say you're lazy. How'd you manage to write all this?' That was flattering."

Again, Donley laughs.

"I've never known as complete a musician as Fred Salas. He was the one who played the keyboard on Freddie Fender's 'Before the Next Teardrop Falls.' We were buddies. He was always at my house on Monday morning, ready to get the lowdown on everything that happened over the weekend."



Donley and Las Estrellas cut their first single in 1955 on the Crescent label with "Lluvia en Mi Corazon" and it quickly became a hit. Another hit, "Flor Del Rio," came in the early Sixties, and is credited with inspiring parents to name their newborn girls 'Flor.' Because Mexican-American or Spanish language music was unrepresented in the mainstream recording industry, a cottage industry of small record labels began to emerge throughout Texas -- Corona in San Antonio, Valmon in Austin, El Zarape Records in Dallas, Disco Grande, Nopal, Crescent, and many, many others. All were catering to an ignored but hungry audience.

The process was no-frills. When a band like Las Estrellas came to town, a

record label owner (sometimes with connections to a small radio station) would offer a one-time fee to cut a single or an entire LP. It was quick pocket money up front, but with little or no return from subsequent sales. Yet, this makeshift approach of making a few hundred platters and broadcasting them where *Mexicanos* were most likely to see and buy them was an important marketing aspect for musicians whose success largely relied on word of mouth. It also made the albums a precious cultural commodity. Leon Hernandez remembers when Las Estrellas's *Flor del Rio* was cut.

"The band was going to play in Seguin, so I said to Cowboy, let's take a couple albums to Rosita."

Rosita Ornelas hosted a Sunday afternoon radio program featuring Tejano music, a new and growing occurrence in the Sixties.

"We took her two albums, and I said, 'Rosie, this one's for the station -- and before I could finish, she said, 'And this one is for me to take home!'"

Few commercial radio stations would play Tejano music, but during the Sixties, small stations began allowing more and more air time, providing another vital link between musicians and their audience. Cowboy Donley y Las Estrellas toured Texas and points across the nation, recording dozens of 45s, vinyl, and even wax platters along the way. In 1978, they made their last recording. Though Donley continued to perform, with and without Las Estrellas, they lost widespread visibility, particularly in the then-exploding Tejano music industry.

"All these things were happening at once," explains Isidoro López. "You had the newer generation of Tejano musicians performing and recording. At first, only a few radio stations might give an hour to Tejano music. Then, all of a sudden, you had whole stations with a Tejano music format. Promoters were taking chances on the 'new' sound, and recording and getting airplay was real important."

By the late Seventies, Tejano music had finally caught the attention of the music industry. Labels like Arista, Sony, and EMI created whole divisions devoted to Tejano or Latin music, and began to pour money into new, young musicians who could appeal to a young and more affluent audience. By the time Tejano music finally began to take off, Manuel Donley was 50. Though many of his early compositions are performed and recorded by a newer generation of Tejano musicians including Ruben Ramos and Nash Hernandez, the use of horns, and more importantly, the complex horn arrangements Donley created, were being diluted or dropped altogether.

"Manuel's music, even when it gets complex, he keeps it harmonizing at fifths and thirds and so on," says Luis Zapata of Gatopardo Productions, who first encountered Donley's music in 1995. "But when other groups try to do his music, the layers disappear because they can't keep it up."

"Nowadays, it's real hard to find a good horn player, because there's not much

demand for them," says Donley. "The newer Tejano musicians are hardly utilizing the saxophone, the clarinet, the trumpet -- it's just keyboards and synthesizers and all that. The human element is gone."

Zapata further points to the arrival of late-Seventies easy listening music as a factor in Donley's disappearance during the Tejano boom.

"Easy listening is based on simplicity with arrangements that are easy to digest. Manuel never changed his sound. Not because he was an idealist, I think, but because it was natural for him to keep it. But the result was that [commercially], he stopped being popular."

Raúl Salinas, an East Austin-born writer and activist, takes a more acerbic view.

"I think Manuel got passed by because the music industry recognized a couple of marketing commodities and went for the trendy. This society goes for the fax copy, instead of the original, which is what Manuel is."

The accordion has such a prominent place in the Tejano music of today, it's difficult to imagine Tejano music without it. That is, unless you're Manuel Donley. He does not use the accordion in any of his music and his opinion of it verges on blasphemy to today's Tejano music fans.

"It's a bad, tonic instrument. It's not a legitimate instrument, [because] it's limited to one key. It's okay for rancheras and for playing at the *ranchito grande* or *los laureles*, and that's about it. You have to have at least two or three octaves to play [music]. You have to have all 13 keys available, all flats and all sharps and all that. But an accordion? There's no way I could use an accordion."

As the Tejano music industry was coming to a rolling boil, Donley's career cooled to a low simmer, and he directed his attention back where he began -- to the guitar and *requinto*. This time, his interest was not in nailing rock & roll riffs, but in continuing to master classical guitar. When bossa nova became popular in the late Seventies, Donley was in good form.



(l-r) Leon Hernandez, Luis Zapata, y Manuel  
"Cowboy" Donley  
photograph by John Carrico

"The first time I heard an Andres Segovia recording, I couldn't believe it," exclaims Donley about the Spanish classical guitar master. "I couldn't believe it was one man. Where did he get all those fingers? But being as ignorant and determined as I was, I said, 'Well, I have one mind, like he does, and I have 10 fingers, like he does.' So I forced myself to go buy some music and I learned all the scales. All those seven notes, I learned them inside out. I explored all the combinations. I said, 'Music can't be that complicated. It's only seven notes.' I forced myself to learn all the classics on the guitar."

Donley has been fortunate to have made a living as a musician, even when his visibility had faded. Weddings and social functions keep him occupied, as well as teaching music classes at Huston-Tillotson College. Over the years, he's written music and arrangements for several movies, including *Remember the Alamo* in 1954, *Los Imigrantes* in the late Seventies, and local filmmaker Hector Galan's *Los Mineros* in the Eighties. Donley may have retired in relative obscurity had it not been for an empty stomach, an old jukebox, and a few loose coins.

"How did I find Manuel?" asks Luis Zapata. "Here, [at the Hernandez Cafe], in that jukebox over there. I was out with some friends that had played at the Victory Grill, and we came here for some food. I saw his name and it automatically attracted my attention because of his name: 'Manuel,' which is Hispanic, 'Cowboy,' Western, and 'Donley,' Irish. I put some coins in and the music came out, and there was this sound, this big orchestra with all these horns and harmonies, and such a beautiful voice."

A former intern with local indie Catfish Records, and now associate producer of Latin Alternative music with La Plaga Productions, Zapata was working on a special project and invited Donley to participate. The project was never completed, but it did get Donley back into the studio after a 20-year absence. With the support of Tary Owens, president of Catfish Records, Manuel Donley y Los Estrellas recently released their first CD, *Adios Chiquita, Exitos de Ayer y Hoy*.

Zapata is hopeful that the new CD will bring Donley some much-deserved recognition and introduce him to new listeners. Although the nature of Tejano music, which Donley played a part in defining has changed, Donley's talent hasn't. "He's a true artist as well as a musician," says Zapata. "Which is allowing him to [make a] comeback."

Is Donley, at 70, ready to kick his career into high gear again? The gleam in his eye says "yes."

"I always wanted to do anything that could be done," says Donley, stopping to think a bit. "I always wanted to prove, to see if I was for real or not."



It's time for the rest of the world to know what East Austin has always known about one of their own: Manuel Donley is for real.

## weekly wire suggested links

- [Austin Chronicle's Music Feature Archives](#) **EE**
- [Belinda Acosta Archives](#) **EE**



Music: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17

Cover: News . Film . Music . Arts . Books . Comics . Search

**weekly  
WIRE**

© 1994-99 DescriNet, LLC . Austin Chronicle . Info Booth . Powered by Dispatch