

Interviewee: Roberto Rodriguez III

Interviewer: Mary Manning

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Transcription Conventions:

“ . . . ” after a phrase that is not completed.

Repeated words/short phrases and fillers such as “uh”, “um,” and “ah” are usually not transcribed.

Pauses and laughter are not noted or transcribed.

Mary:                   [:03] We know it's working because, the numbers are moving. Today is June 21st of 2015. I'm Mary Manning, with The Houston Art's Alliance Folk Life and Traditional Arts Program. I'm in a practice space above the Continental Club in Houston, Texas, interviewing musician Roberto Rodriguez, who's kindly agreed to share his knowledge and experience being a musician who plays Tex Mex, conjunto, cumbia, and other styles of music.

Roberto:               [:08] Yes.

Mary:                   [:29] For the first question, I'm just ask you to tell me a little bit about learning how to play the accordion.

Roberto:               [:37] Learning how to play the accordion, it's a very unique instrument. When I came about it, I actually wanted to learn how to play guitar. I asked my parents that I wanted music lessons but, when I was younger, we didn't have money for music lessons so, they just kind of gave me a guitar but, I never learned how to play it. One day, my dad showed up, and he goes, "Hey, tomorrow, you're gonna have a teacher." I was like, "Cool. What am I gonna learn?" He goes, "Accordion.", and I'm like, "What is that?" So, I really didn't know what it was. So, my teacher showed up the next day, just like my dad said, and asked me, "Have I ever played it? Have I ever tried it?" I told him, "No." He goes, "Okay. Well, we'll start from scratch." So, he put it on me, and I had no idea how to work it. It looked like a typewriter to me. That's what everybody used to tell me.

[01:35] He showed me my first notes and how to handle it with the technique, and I had no idea what he was talking about. After I held it for about an hour, he stayed with me for two hours the first practice so, we never had rehearsal. Learning it was very difficult in the beginning, because like I said, to me, I didn't see a structure in it. Just like you would sit in front of a piano or have a guitar, you actually saw the structure of how it went. But, with the accordion, there's no ... well, the particular accordion that I play, it's a button diatonic. So, it's just like a harmonica.

[02:21] If you could picture somebody playing harmonica, they blow air out and suck air in, and you have two different notes. So, that's exactly what a diatonic button

accordion does is, when you pull the bag out, you have one note but, when you push it in, it's another note. So, it took me a while to figure that out and find the structure but, once I found the structure of it, it all became simple. So, there is a structure to playing the button accordion. It's just that you have to sit down, and you'll see there's various accordions that are painted differently, they have different color buttons on the ... there is a button version of the accordion that is chromatic, and it does have buttons, and some of those actually have black and white buttons, just like a piano. So, you'll know, which ones are your sharps, which ones are just your regular keys. But, in the button diatonic, it doesn't matter what color your buttons are, they're just there for decoration. So, that was something I had to learn as well.

[03:33] Once I figured that out, I started thinking just like a harmonica player, and the button diatonic, three row, that I perform with, I have three harmonicas in one big giant box. That's the easiest way I explain to people, of how to play the diatonic accordion that I play. It's having three harmonicas, and because I have three harmonicas at once, I get to do full scales, full chords, and get to play a lot of variety because off that. Also, learning the bass side, on the bass side, you're bass buttons, they're also diatonic. You don't have a full range of bass so, you actually have to kind of cheat, I guess is the best way to explain it because, you don't have your full chords when you're trying to do your sevens. You do have majors but, you don't have the full range off it so, whenever you're doing some minors, you sometimes have to cheat, doing the same major chords.

[4:45] Which doesn't make sense in music but, as far as playing the diatonic accordion, for us, that's the way we have to play. You'll see that a lot, even with the Cajun Creole zydeco players that play the one row button accordion, which is also diatonic, and that's having just one harmonica. But they have the bass side too, and they only have in and out on the bass. It's just major. It don't matter if they're playing minors or not. So, it takes a while to learn. I teach the accordion so, I've gotten to learn the instrument inside and out. Someone who hasn't, like myself when I started, I had no idea how to do anything on it so, I've kind of like, I think teaching the accordion gives me another perspective on how people view it. I've noticed that once they learn the technique, it usually takes them about a month to get used to holding it, and playing along with it. It's a different instrument to try to tackle but, it's enjoyable. You have so much fun trying to learn it, and it gets you working a lot. Gets your brain working.

Mary: [6:01] Tell me more about teaching accordion.

Roberto: [6:03] Teaching accordion, that was never my intention at all. That fell into my lap, and that was from my teacher, who sadly, he passed away about three years ago. But, I studied under him about, I think close to 10 years. He was a teacher that, from his upbringing, he learned the traditional oral way of everything being passed down to him so, when he started learning, they taught him how to play accordion, and he kind of like, learned to play on his own. The music part of it, he learned on his own. He really didn't have any proper teaching. With myself, he started teaching me that way but, I actually wanted to understand how music actually worked. I ended up just

choosing to take some beginner music courses, music theory courses, and that opened up an entirely new door for me. Because, I was already learning music, but orally, but I didn't understand the function of it so, I actually took the music courses.

[07:26] From there, people started asking me, "Can you teach me?" I had never tried it before. I was like, "Well, okay. Let's try it." My teacher always told me that all of his students, he always taught different because, everybody learns different so, I kind of had that in the back of my mind. I ended up starting to teach. That was something I didn't really expect was gonna do anything for me. I guess I'm on my fifth year right now, of teaching, and that's actually what I do during the day is, teach music, teach accordion. It's kind of rewarding because, you get to see some of the kids every week. I have kids ranging from five years old, all the way to about, students in their 60's that are retirees.

[08:25] Each one is completely different, and each one learns at a different pace but, I know the feeling of ... the same feeling that I saw through the eyes of my teacher, I understand what he felt when one of your students gets up on stage, and starts performing, and you're the one who taught him all that. They get into it, and it's very rewarding for me. Especially for the younger generation because, a lot of them, I'm trying to teach them a lot of the old, old song. Well, instrumentals and older songs with lyrics that you don't hear anymore. And, I started figuring that out when even some of the parents would bring me their students, they had no idea certain songs that I would ask them about, and they just wouldn't remember. They would say, "Oh, that's probably from my mom's era, or my grandfather's era.", but that type of music was passed down through my teacher, and he was, what? He was in his 60's when he was teaching me.

[09:34] So, all of the stuff as his childhood music, he passed onto me so, whenever I perform some of those songs, it's more the older generation that are in their 60's and 70's, that still remember those, and they never heard of them in over 30 years. That brings me a lot of joy because, they ask me, "How'd I learn that? I'm so young, and I shouldn't even know those." But, I tell them I've been listening to roots music since I was young so, I still remember all those songs. Now that I know how to play them, some of the polkas, and the chotisas, and redovas, they're really glad that I still know those so, I'm trying to teach that to the younger generation. And, I'm trying to tell them that, that's where all the music comes from. Well, Mexican-American music that we do on accordion that, that's where it comes from, that's where it all started. So, I just keep telling them, "Don't forget about it, and learn how to play it.", and I know all their friends don't know it but, I tell them, "At least you know it, and keep playing it because, someday you're gonna pass it on, and you're gonna tell them, that's where it all comes from."

[10:48] That's where everything from the traditional roots, conjunto, Norteño, like you'll hear all that and that's where it come from. I'll just tell them, "Keep going with it and just don't let it go. Even record it. Record it down." I still do this, and my teacher gave me the idea as well. After I show somebody the techniques and the scales, and certain songs, what I do is, I either ask my students to get their

smartphones out and video tape me, like through video. So what I do is, I go over the lesson again but, I'll have them video tape me so, they can take that home and have that as a record. Then, sometimes when they get good enough, instead of me doing it, I ask them to do it so, I record them to play, so that way, they can see themselves doing what I told them to do, and that way it helps them out to remember. If they ever forget, which I've done myself, I still have a cassette tape set I used to record on during my lessons when I was younger.

[12:00] I guess when I was around 15-16 years old, I went back and heard them, and there's instrumental songs there that, I completely forgot about so, I just started learning them again but, I'm glad I was able to record them so, that's another way of kind of helping my students remember and keep what they've learned, so they can remember, even though they forget sometimes. But, they always have something to document it, that they can go back to. It's very rewarding though. I enjoy it. I didn't think I was gonna enjoy it that much but, I kind of look forward every week to even meeting new students because, then you always have those new students that are very eager to learn. Some of them get frustrated because they try to learn on their own so, whenever they have a helping hand, it kind of gives them relief, and they see the light at the end of the tunnel, and they tell themselves, "Oh, I can do this." I've had a lot of students where, especially my older students that have jobs, have families, some retirees.

[13:05] They always tell me, "Hey, can you teach this old dog? I don't think I'll ever learn." When I tell them to give me three months, and at the end of the three months, they're actually performing, I get to see that smile. Like, "Man, I would have never thought I would be playing." I'm like, "Yeah man, you can do it. It's just music. Music's fun, it's easy." Anybody can learn at whatever age, no matter how old you are. It's very rewarding to see that with them.

Mary: [13:30] Describe how your music and part of your family and community when you were growing up.

Roberto: [13:37] The music was always around. It didn't matter where we were. At home, my mom would always have the radio on while she was cooking or cleaning. I mean, even before I could even walk, I would always hear music but, I got the best of both worlds because, my mom, she was born in Mexico so growing up, our first language was Spanish, and of course, we heard nothing but Spanish music so, that was my first experience with listening to the accordion, and the bajo sexto, and all the traditional stuff. But at the same time, when my dad would BBQ and bring his friends over to the house, he was born and raised in Houston Texas so, he grew up during the 70's so, during the 70's, it was nothing but rock and roll. I had the great privilege to sit down with him and his buddies, and they would tell me the stories of how they grew up, how they used to always listen to rock and roll, and they would teach me about Black Sabbath, and Santana, and Deep Purple, and Pink Floyd, and a lot of the old classic rock and roll. It was weird. Ever since I was a young kid, that's why I wanted to do music.

[15:02] The only thing I know about is that my dad, when he was younger, he played percussion a little bit but, just a garage band. Nothing fancy, never in big bands or anything. I always wondered where music came from, as far as where I got it from, and my grandfather, which is my mom's dad, we've never met him. From what I understand, I think he's still alive, and somewhere in Mexico but, we just don't know who he is. They told my mom that, he was actually a leader of an orchestra in Mexico but, we never knew who he was. My mom has never met him, and of course, I haven't either. I think that's where it trickled down to me because, I guess it passed a generation and got to me because, out of my entire family, I'm the only one that kind of got the bug, and stuck with it. But, by being around two different styles of music, that kind of started giving me ideas of, "Ooh, I could play rock and roll. I could play Mexican music at the same time as well." So, that kind of rekindled a fire in me, to where of course, I learned Mexican music first, Mexican-American music, and then I started asking myself, "Well now that I know this, how can I start implementing all the American music my dad showed me with his friends?"

[16:37] People always used to tell me, "That was never gonna happen.", especially because I was playing accordion. At the time, I was around 15-16, that's around where I started playing. Back then, I didn't really know much about the history of different music so, the only thing I knew was Mexican-American music, and all the classic rock and roll. People always saw the accordion as, "Oh, that's for Mexican music.", and I didn't know any better either so, they just started telling me, "Oh, you can't do English music with it. You can't do anything like that." So, me being the person that I am, I'm like, "Yeah you can, man. It's a musical instrument." Because, I started thinking about how people use guitar, they use even a harmonica, and piano. They play in so many different types of music, why can't you do that was accordion so, that's what I started doing, and telling people, "Well, I'm playing rock and roll now so, deal with it now. It's happening." But, it was because of the music that I had at home, and the radio was always on. There was never a day where the radio wasn't on.

[17:42] If the radio wasn't on, Spanish TV was always on. In Spanish TV, there was always music happening through that TV as well. Especially on the Spanish stations so, whenever they would put on a lot of the Mexican movies, the Mexican movies were the first ones where I first saw actual Mexican bands, from the northern part of the border playing bajo sexto on accordion, and they would have the mariachis as well. So, they would do the serenades in the movies, and I would see that and I'm like, "Oh, that so cool. When I get a girlfriend, I could do that." That kind of gave me the ideas of, "Wow. That's how it is." Especially a lot of the old Mexican movies. They're always at the bar, sitting down drinking because their woman left them. So, you would see these musicians walk in and just start corridos and doing all the sad songs, the drinking songs. I'm like, "Wow." I kind of saw that of how music and people listening to that, how that affects one another so, that really got me into like, "Okay. I want to do this.", once I saw those movies.

[19:06] Those were the first ones where I saw that, where the interaction between the crowd and the musicians, of course because I was too young to go to bars and go see actual musicians live.

[19:17] Also, watching Tom & Jerry because, Tom & Jerry, that was my first experience. It was so weird because, me and my buddy Nick, we performed together, we had kind of the same experiences where, Tom & Jerry was our first introduction to jazz music, and I didn't know I was listening to jazz in the beginning. I was just watching cartoons as a little kid but, I seen that big upright bass, and especially when they would have the skeletons forming a band and all that. I certainly remember watching Tom & Jerry, and listening to all that music, and I had no idea that was jazz. It was just music for me but, I really enjoyed it, and I liked all the melodies they had so, that really sparked more of an interest of like, "Oh, let's stick with music." Music's always been around so, it's always kept me going for everything I've done.

Mary: [20:14] Tell me about when you first started performing.

Roberto: [20:17] My first time performing? It was probably about two years after I actually started studying the accordion. Back then, the only people I knew that played music were, the professionals. Luckily, my father, we had made friends with a couple of Mexican-American artists. One being the Hometown Boys, and also my teacher of course. My teacher was part of a very Tejano group, Roberto Pulido Y Los Clasicos, and we became friends with them because he was my teacher, so I got to meet all of them. Both of those groups were pretty much my foundation to start performing. One because my teacher taught me, and in the music world, they knew my teacher as a master accordionist of Tejano music. He was considered to be one of the best within the community, even though he wasn't well known. Of course, fans knew him but, as far as being a musician, he was the musician to go after.

[21:44] I would study with him but, I would spend more time with The Hometown Boys. They were out of Lubbock. So, every time they would come to town, I'd go over there and just mess around with the accordion player, and I'd tell him, "Show me tricks." They used to come over to the house and have coffee with us, or eat. One day, their father, who was pretty much like the leader of the group, he asked me to play something at the house, and I did. He goes, "Do you know all of our stuff?" I was like, "Yeah. I study." By then, I was about 16 years old, and I was sneaking into the Spanish clubs with my parents. I guess not sneaking in but, I was able to go with them because, I was with my parents. After a year or so of watching them perform, I studied all their stage performance. They used to have hand signs whenever they would move over to certain songs, and so I studied all those hand signs, and I learned them all. The Hometown Boys was like my favorite group so, I learned all their stuff. After the dad finally heard me, he goes, "Bring your accordion tonight." I'm like, "Really?" And that was the first time he had ever asked. Because I mean, I wasn't gonna ask.

[23:06] I knew but, I was just too embarrassed and I was too afraid. But he goes, "I'll put you up on stage tonight." And I'm like, "Really?" My eyes lit up, and so nervous, had butterflies in my stomach. I was excited because I was gonna play with my favorite band. That's all I wanted to do. I wanted to be a part of that band, that was my dream. I'm like, "I want to be part of The Hometown Boys." That was my dream. That night, I was ... where were we at? It's not around anymore but it used to be called El Casino, off of Wayside and I-10. They got me up on stage, and I thought I was gonna perform one song. Well, the singer Ricky, who sadly passed away as well, I remember him telling me, he goes, "You ready for this?" I was like, "Yeah." So, they started playing, and I remember starting off the song. At the end of the song, I was looking at him to kind of give me the cue of, "Okay, we're gonna end." He just gave me this grin and looked at me from the corner of his eye, gave me the grin and I'm like, "Oh no. Oh no."

[24:24] He gave the hand sign to the rest of the group, and luckily I knew what the hand sign meant. We were changing into another song but, we were changing from one key to another key, which is very ... Well you know, even their transitions, I studied them and I learned them. I was so nervous. I was looking around for the accordion player, and I saw him down below the stage, and I kind of waived at him. I'm like, "Man, come over here and save me. Hurry." He looked at me, he had a beer in his hand, he put the beer up and kind of said, "Cheers.", and just walked away. I was like, "Oh no. Oh no.", and they started another song. Luckily, I was so nervous but, I still was able to perform to all, and ended up playing for 40 minutes my very first time on stage. Man, was i shaking when I got done. I was laughing because, it was laughter of nerves. I mean, I couldn't do anything else but, I was shaking so, when we got done with the set, the singer came to me and I hugged him, I hugged everybody and told them, "Thank you."

[25:40] The singer goes, "You wanted to be a musician? Welcome to the life." He told me, "You're either gonna do it or you're not, and this was your test." He goes, "You were thrown in the fire, and that's what a real musician has to go through. There's no second chances." He goes, "If you would have screwed up, you would have screwed up but, you kept going, and you took it like a real musician." He goes, "Welcome to the club." That, I will never forget that night, where my heart was pounding. You know? The best feeling I had was, I guess all the crowd gave me so much applause because I was so young, and a lot of them were very surprised that I was able to handle the stress, and handle the amount of playing time that we did, about 40 minutes. Which, to somebody new, somebody to get up on stage, it's the first time, you don't think about that. You want to play one song and get off but no, I played almost their entire second set, and everybody gave me a pat on the back so, I felt very proud.

[26:57] For them to give me the Okay, being The Hometown Boys give me the Okay, I was like, "Oh, I made it. I made it now." That was an experience that always stuck with me. That experience has never left, and it humbled me very much, because of the way they treated me, they didn't treat me like a kid, even though I was a kid back then. They treated me as a fellow musician so, they were like, "If this is what you

want to do, this is what you're gonna have to go through, and you're probably gonna have to go through this pretty much for as long as you're playing because, people might invite you to get up on stage.", and they were like, "Just be ready for it. Always be ready." That was the number one thing. Always be ready for anything. It kind of kept me pushing on learning, not just the instrument itself but, just music in general. I'm still learning music. I haven't stopped.

[27:55] I learn from everybody, every single musician I've ever met, it doesn't matter if they're horn players, guitar players, any string instrument, violin players, piano players, even drummers. I ask them questions of certain techniques they do, and then I try to mimic them on the accordion, and see what I can come out with. That kind of keeps me on my toes because, I have performed with a lot of people, and I've gone on stage with people I've never met. Don't know their playing style, just don't know anything. They'll just tell me, "Hey, get your accordion and come up." They tell me what key they're in and I just follow them. But, that all started from that day, when I got up for the first time, playing with The Hometown Boys, and I'll never forget that. Never forget that so, that was an experience.

Mary: [28:49] Tell me about some of the first bands you played with.

Roberto: [28:55] My very first actual band, was a Los Skarnales out of Houston Texas. I joined them because I met one of my best friends in the world. I consider him my brother, Nick Gaitan. We met in college at The University of Houston, at the Mexican-American Lounge. I had an AC/DC shirt, and saw that, and he said, "Pretty cool man. You like rock and roll?" I was like, "Yeah, I like rock and roll.", and then he found out I played accordion. He goes, "What? You play accordion, but you like rock ..." I was like, "Yeah man." He goes, "Will you be interested in joining a ska/punk group? We sing in Spanish." I'm like, "What is that?" I didn't know at the time, what ska music was. I'd heard about punk, but I wasn't really into the music because, I just grew up with Mexican-American music around me, and old classic rock and roll.

[29:53] Then he started telling me what ska and reggae was. I'm like, "Oh, Bob Marley. Bob Marley. I did hear about him." But he goes, "But, this is ska man. This is before reggae." Then, he was like, "You ever heard of Toots & The Maytals? Like, "No." So, he started giving me all these records, and all this music, and I just started listening to it. Listening to mambo, and then I met the singer, Felipe Galvan, and he was a character. Joining that group, they pretty much filled my brain with ever sort of genre you could think of. They're the ones who schooled me in like, what was the real punk. The old roots of country, honky tonk, blues, roots rock and roll, with Chuck Berry and listened to that. Then, they just fed me anything and everything they could, and they just told me, "Now, play the accordion over that." I'm like, "What? What am I supposed to do with this? I don't know how to do any of this." They were like, "Well, we gotta figure it out."

[30:59] So, Los Skarnales was my training camp, was my boot camp to going into all sorts of genres. Without Skarnales, I wouldn't be where I am today but, every single musician at that time, because at that time, I think I was the 32nd member or

something like that, I'm not sure. They had already gone through so many lineup changes, and the lineup that I joined, was a Pachuco Boogie Sound System line, and that's what we called it. We had drums, upright bass, organ, guitar and accordion. So, it was only six of us, and of course, Felipe singing. My first shows with them, I was pretty much like deer in the headlights. I was so used to playing Mexican-American clubs, you know, seeing people dance on the dance floor, having a good time. Well, I didn't know that the good time that kids have over here with us, especially with Skarnales because, they were already established when I joined them, that was my first time I ever saw a mosh pit happen, and I'm like, "Why are you hitting each other?" But, I didn't really understand the culture because, I never grew up with that.

[32:21] They taught me, "That's what our shows are all about. We just have fun, drinking. We play music for people, and they're happy." So, it was just mind boggling. My years in Skarnales were some of the best that I've ever had because, they taught me what it was to know how to tour. You know? Like, touring with them at the time, we didn't have no money. We slept in cars. I think at one point, I slept in someone's front lawn before. Sometimes, somebody would just kind of invite us to their house, and we were like, "Hey, can we stay here?" They're like, "Yeah, sure." I would find like, a table, or a desk, and I would just crawl under there, that way I wouldn't get stepped on while the part was going on, and I just fell asleep there. But, they're the ones who taught me how to tour, taught me about just different genres of music, and what it was to actually be in my own band.

[33:26] I had a set of brother, that we went around the country together, and performed. After we went our separate ways, I stuck with Nick Gaitan, and he formed Nick Gaitan & The Umbrella Man, and he had told me that when we went our separate ways at that time, I went back to school because, I had left the university, and I didn't think I was gonna go back but, when we went our separate ways from Skarnales, I decided to go back to school and get my degree. Nice was doing Umbrella Man but, he was doing it more kind of like jazz. For him, it was just gonna be like a little side project. He just wanted to do jazz. Like, "All right, cool." But then soon after, he called me back, and he goes, "Hey man, you wanna keep jammin' together?" I'm like, "Yeah man, let's do it."

[34:22] So, he kept the name, and we started performing together again. We started coming up with new music, and because I had that background on Mexican-American music, he goes, "Hey man. You wanna sing some of those Spanish tunes that you do, that are traditional" I was like, "Yeah sure." And, he started writing his own music. So, we started mixing and matching, doing Tex Mex Conjunto with his original music, and then I started writing original music. So, it just started growing from there, and Nick Gaitan & The Umbrella Man, that is a band where, since both me and Nick were in Skarnales, we learned all our craft there so, Nice Gaitan & The Umbrella Man was the point of where, "Okay, we're grown up now so, we have to change. What direction do we want to go to?" That's when we started kind of coming into our own, finding out what we wanted to play, how we want to play it, and doing it our way.

[35:22] You know, both of us performed with different groups, even with Umbrella Man. Even to this day, I'm still ... Umbrella Man, I think Nick started in '05 or '06, somewhere around there. We're still with Umbrella Man but, during that time, I also made my own band called Pistoleros de Texas, and just this past year, December of 2014, I decided to kind of cancel that band out because, I did have it to close to six, seven years. In that group, that was my own group so, that was my very first group that I had on my own, and was a lead singer of. I did more traditional Tex Mex, I did a little bit of country. But, it started fizzling out because, some of my band members, I lost a few of them just because life happens so, they were going their own way. Me and the drummer, Rajiv Grover, we stuck together, and I just recently formed another band that I have called, Pulpo, which is Spanish for Octopus.

[36:38] Now, I'm transitioning to another sound. We're still doing Tex Mex but, we're getting more punk in there. We're still trying to form the sounds but, it's getting there. Yeah, out of all the bands, this is my fourth one but, we've been together for quite a number of years. And then throughout the years, I've also performed with bands from Los Angeles, Tremoloco. I performed with Sisters Morales out of San Antonio, and in the summer 2014, after going on a two month trip to Canada with Tremoloco from L.A., I came back to a phone call, and I actually performed with Los Lobos for three days. They called me because, they needed an accordion player that could play rock and roll, and traditional Mexican music. David Hidalgo, who was their leader or their main singer and accordion player, I think he had surgery or something. He couldn't go on the tour to finish off the tour so, I got called up, and I was able to perform with Lobos for three days.

[37:40] I did Louisville Colorado, then Reno Nevada, and Sun Valley Idaho. I did three shows with them. Now, that's been my biggest show that I've ever done, is being up there with Los Lobos because, we've been able to party with Texas Tornados, and Flaco and all that. You know, some of my idols and stuff. Well, Augie Meyers but, to be able to perform with Los Lobos, that was something I never thought was gonna happen, ever, ever. And, to get the phone call, I thought it was a joke but no, it surely happened so, I've had the pleasure of performing with a lot of groups, and also a lot of great musicians. I was able to record an album with Dave Alvin, out of everybody, with Tremoloco. It's been good meeting all these musicians on the road, and finding out they know my friends back home so, it's such a small world. Such a small community of musicians that, it's great to meet all these guys, and especially some who are my idols, getting able to perform alongside them, sharing the stage with them, and then being able to drink with them. So those have been great, great experiences throughout my life.

Mary: [39:14] Tell me about all the different genres or styles of music that you play, or perform.

Roberto: [39:21] Well, I think I've dabbled into everything you can think of. The main thing that I still do is, I still do traditional Tex Mex, I'll do norteño, I'll do conjunto, then I'll mix it up with a bit of honky tonk. I'll play blues, I've done rock and roll, we've played

metal. I've done Ace of Spades from Motor Head, and that's another great group I love, that I grew up listening to. We've played some Pink Floyd. I've done that on accordion. Let's see. Of course, ska/reggae, I've done a lot of that. That was the first type of genre that actually came after the Mexican-American music, was ska/reggae because, Skarnales. And being able to share the stage with Toots & The Maytals finally, after years and years of listening to them, and finally gotten to meet them, I was like, "Oh wow. It's him." So, the ska/reggae thing, that was great. I still love that music, and we try to perform that every once in a while.

[40:38] I've recorded different a couple tracks for different people for hip hop. That was kind of weird for me to do on accordion but, I ended up doing it somehow. I remember doing a commercial for Fiesta, and they wanted an accordion, but the music was not Mexican-American. I remember, they told me the plot of the commercial, and it was supposed to be a genie coming out of a bottle so, they wanted ... I don't know what you might call it but, it was some type of Middle Eastern melody, is what they had so, I had to learn that, and perform it on accordion but, it wasn't Mexican. It was Middle Eastern like type thing, and I learned how to do that. While I was doing that, that got me interested in those sounds from the Middle East so, I started listening to music, like gypsy jazz, and that I still can't do. I've been wanting to try it. I've performed blue grass before. What else?

[41:58] Some of my friends that actually study jazz, have actually been trying to teach me but, I'm still trying with that. Myself, I still haven't gotten to that level, I think, is to perform jazz. But, pretty much every genre that you could think of, I've tried to dabble into it, and I tried to put it into the accordion. When I dabble into music like that, I learn certain scales that people use, and what I do is, I take those, I'll try to see if it fits. Right now, I'm trying to mix in cumbias with punk rock. We've been performing those, when we do a cumbia, and my drummer, he didn't grow up listening to Mexican-American music. He's a punk rock drummer. He's just straight up punk rock. That's what he grew up, that's what he played.

[43:09] To try to teach him what a cumbia was, a cumbia rhythm, I just showed it to him through different songs but, he never actually learned the actual rhythm, the beat, or the way you're supposed to play the drums on it. Other drummers that know how to play that have told him before, and he's kind of got them weirded out about it because he doesn't know. He goes, "Am I doing it wrong?" I'm like, "Actually, no. I don't want you to play it like traditional. I want you to play like you." That's what I like doing now with him. Since he's not a traditional cumbia player, he plays his cumbias the way he feels them, and then in the middle of them, when we're doing solos, I tell him to play punk rock. So, we switch it to punk rock, and people are still dancing to it, and they even get more excited because, they start hearing the punk rock rhythm, and they just freak out. Because, they're like, "Weren't we just listening to a cumbia?" I'm like, "Yeah, y'all were.", but then we go back to, you can call it cumbia rhythm, and we just finish it as a cumbia rhythm, and people kind of look at us like, "What the hell did y'all just do?"

[44:21] It's kind of fun. Like, it's what keeps me going is like, I never, ever want to back down from any genre. If there's a genre that somebody tells me, "Hey, try it.", I'll try it, because of the very first time when people told me that I was never gonna be able to be able to play an accordion, to use it in American music. That fire has never died out. I always want to do something bigger and better, and see what else I can do. Because it's such a versatile instrument, learning about the history of the accordion, and everywhere you can find it around the world, like it's based on all folk music, so I'm like, "Wow. You can do so much with this." That's what makes it a unique instrument to myself, and I dabble with the guitar. I'm not too good with piano but, I can sit down and kind of take out a tune but, I really enjoy the accordion because, it gives me such versatility, that I can just go anywhere with it.

[45:31] It's such a small instrument, that I can carry it around anywhere I go, and if somebody wants to jam, I just take it out and just start jammin'. No matter what type of music they have. I really enjoy every type of music from all over the world. I listen to world music, and I remember even being in school. I took world music because, I wanted to learn about different music, and when I found out about Mongolian throat singing, that was fascinating to me. I was like, "Wow. These guys are doing all that stuff with just their throat. They're making melodies." That was just amazing to me. So, I really enjoy finding new stuff like that. Especially if it's folk, or anything like that. Because, you just never know. All that stuff, you can make it yours, you know? Learning about stuff like that, it keeps me going. I enjoy it so much. So much. But yeah, it's great though. It's great just listening to anything and everything. You know?

[46:37] Even sounds like cumbia, and the Cuban musics, and salsa. Salsa's kind of hard for me. I haven't really tried much with the salsa stuff but, I know back in the early days, when merengue was starting to come up, they used to use the accordion but, I listen to some of those older recordings but, they play so fast. I'm just not that used to that right now at all. I can't keep up with them. Their technique is so different from what I know so, I actually have to sit down and from scratch, and try to learn it. That's what I'm actually doing right now but, learning zydeco. I'm trying to learn zydeco but, I have to learn from scratch because, I been listening to it for many years but, the technique that they use, is different from what I perform so, I have to sit down, just like anybody else, and start from scratch, and learn their technique. I'm trying to do that so, that's my next goal, is to try to learn zydeco and play it. But, I'm trying. I'm trying.

Mary: [47:49] Tell me more about audiences reactions to when you mix a more traditional Mexican-American style with maybe a different type of a genre.

Roberto: [48:05] I get mixed reactions from the crowd. A lot of the older folks that are more traditionalist I guess, I don't know if they're afraid of change but, they don't like it when something does change. Just recently, not too long ago, about a couple weeks ago, I performed at Discovery Green here in Houston, and I was opening up for a Tejano legend, David Lee Garza, who of course I've grown up with, and he was a very good friend of my teacher. He is traditional Tejano. What you consider Tejano back

in the heyday, and back in the late 80's, early 90's. He is and still considered one of the best Tejano groups that has ever been around. We performed as Pulpo, and I guess because I haven't been playing for a Tejano crowd for a while. Right now, I guess my audience is pretty much ... You have people coming into Houston that don't know anything about Tex Mex, they don't know anything about Mexican-American music so, to them, being able to hear it is a joy for them but, I perform weekly, and everywhere I perform, I do have some Mexican-Americans in the audience, but then I have whites, we have blacks, we have Asians. They come from all over so, we just mix up the music. For us, it's normal. We'll do punk, we'll do country, we'll do rock and roll, we'll play Tex Mex, we'll do cumbias. So, we mix it all up.

[49:55] The crowd reaction is great because, I start seeing people of all sorts of color and cultures. The great thing when we're performing is that, they'll just grab somebody and just start dancing. Which, in the Mexican-American community, you don't really see that much because, you're just dancing with your significant other, or you're trying to find a lady to dance with, and trying to make her your significant other. So, that's what you see a lot of at the Mexican-American dancing so, you don't really see too much of mixing. Over here, when I get to play with Pulpo at certain locations in Houston, I have a mix of everybody so, it don't matter where you're from, you just get up and dance. It don't matter if you know how to dance or not, you learn how to dance, or somebody teaches you, and I really enjoy that because they give me a lot of feedback, and they kind of tell me like, "Oh man. I'm doing something good." Because, I'll perform at the Big Top, I'll go to Voodoo Queen, which is a bar, and there's two different locations that we play at weekly, and each one has two different types of crowd. But both of them, are very great.

[51:07] They clap for us, they holler, it's a drinking crowd. They want to have a good time. When I performed finally, it had been about, I want to say seven years that I performed in front of an actual Tejano crowd. So, opening up for David Lee Garza, I started doing a lot of my original songs. Which of course, I'm singing in Spanish but, I'm also singing in English but, I'm not doing traditional rhythms, even though I have the accordion. It wasn't until toward the end of our set, where a light bulb kind of turned on in my head and I'm like, "Oh." I only saw maybe two couples dancing. All I saw in the crowd, I think they had like, from what they told me, close to 5000 people there that day. So, I had these thousand people in front of me, and they were just kind of like staring at me, like sitting down, staring. I mean, they were clapping. I guess they enjoyed it but, it wasn't the reaction I was hoping for. So, I turned around to my guys, I was like, "Hey man, I know I told y'all we weren't gonna do this but, let's play a polka." So, I started performing a polka.

[52:29] Well, that changed the audience's reaction. That's when the hootin' and hollerin' started happening, and I saw more people started getting up and dance. I completely forgot. I was like, "Well, I gotta play for the crowd." At the same time, I was trying to show my music that I had. My original music, which it's new, and a lot of people of course haven't heard it but, it's a new type of style that I'm trying to do. Trying to get it out there. After the polka, we played a traditional Mexican-American

song called, Puño De Tierra. It's another drinking song so like same thing. Had the same reaction, everybody's happy, drinking, dancing. And then, I ended the show with a cumbia, and they enjoyed the cumbias. When we got off, someone came up to me, an older gentleman, and he goes, "I thought you guys were gonna be Tejano." I was like, "Why'd you think that?", "Because Davis Lee Garza's here?" I was like, "David Lee Garza is Tejano. I'm not Tejano." He goes, "Well, why aren't you Tejano?" I'm like, "Because we don't want to do Tejano. We're trying to do something else." And I was like, "If you notice up on stage, there was only one other Mexican-American besides me, which is my buddy that was on timbales and congas, Paul Ramirez." And I told him, "You see my band?" I'm like, "They're not Tejano. They're not Mexican-American. They don't know Tejano."

[54:04] I have an Indian guy that plays drums, Rajiv Grover, I have Conrad Lemos, I think he's half Mexican-American and half Greek, I want to say. I think. And then I have a white guy playing steel from Lafayette, Louisiana." So I tell him, "We're not Tejano. We're Tejano because we're from Texas. That's where we're from but, we'll do Tex Mex." But, I had a little conversation with him, and he goes, "Yeah, yeah. I should play traditional Tejano. Y'all should keep it going." I'm like, "We are keeping it going. I still do traditional songs but, I want to get away from that." I'm like, "Times have changed. You know?" There's this real big debate right now with Tejano music, especially with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, they had a big debate with that but, it's very hard to try to talk to your own culture, and tell them, "Hey. The reason why there's no Tejano in Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, is because nobody wants to pay for tickets. That's why I don't play Tejano."

[55:11] I got away from playing conjunto and Tejano music because, nobody wants to pay me to perform, and I can't make a living off that. I've had a lot of bar owners, and of course, Tejano's been getting smaller and smaller because there's no radio play but, I try to tell the people that, it's the own people's fault. Y'all guys don't support it. You say you do but, whenever there's a show happening, you start crying about, "Oh, I gotta pay five bucks?" Yeah, you're paying five buck to go see five bands. That's a deal. You know? So, if David Lee Garza would come to town, he might charge 10-15 bucks at the door, which is not a lot. There's no thing of groups that you go see Los Carta De Unades, or Ramon Ayala. They're charging \$50 at the door, and people pay that to go see them. They're norteño, of course, it's like a different genre, different style but, people go pay that. That's why they're still around, that's why they still sell records.

[56:19] You tell people that want to hear Tejano, "Hey, go pay 20 bucks to go see this band.", "Oh, that's too much. I don't wanna go see them now." But, I heard people at Discovery Green, they're like, "Oh look, you see all these Tejanos, they all come out to support." I'm like, "Yeah, because this is a free show." I'm like, "If we had all these 5000 people, if they paid for a show, then Tejano would be big. But, you're coming out for a free show so, that doesn't count, you know? Where were you at when I was trying to do Tejano? I'm charging five bucks at the door but, that's too much for you so, you don't want to come." Or bar owners, "Oh, come out here just for promotion.", "Well, I don't need promotion. I already have plenty of promotion. I

need you to pay me so, I can go perform. I'm performing a service to you." So, that's what I think is wrong with some of the people that are kind of irritated that they don't want change but, change is happening, and they don't want to see it.

[57:22] I had conversations with people about the Huston Livestock Show. I'm not mad at them. Even though I grew up listening to Tejano, I'm not mad. They're bringing in groups that are gonna fill in seats and put money in their pocket. That's what it is. It's all about money. You have bands, you know bandas. With bandas, it's Mexican music but, it's Mexican music from the west coast. You know, those big bandas, you have the big orchestras and all that. We don't really listen to that. Well, I don't really listen to that here. But, I always tell people that, times have changed here in Houston. There's been a big migration of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans from the west coast. They're bringing in their music. Well, it's their music. They're paying for it, so that's why you hear so much of that music now, banda music, and you have more ranchera music but, with banda, and then now there's a mixture of the accordion with banda so, that's a big deal right now.

[58:21] But, to the Tejanos and norteños, they listen to Tejano and norteño, they don't like that style of music. I'm like, "Well, you're the ones that have to do the change." I'm like, "Go spend money on the records, go to the shows, go support the local acts that are doing it." I still have a lot of friends that still do conjunto but, there's a circle that they're in, and they never get out of that. I'm like, "Dude, don't you get tired of playing for ..." and, there's nothing wrong with that. All their friends and all their families are the ones that go see them. We're like, "That is great but, wouldn't you want to take your music out to an entirely new world where, nobody knows about conjunto? Why don't you show somebody over here? Come to downtown. Come try a show where, they'll actually pay you to perform because, you're performing. You're performing a service." Where they play at, it's their own little circle, and they don't want to get out of that because of the same thing.

[59:20] I've talked to some musicians that are recorded players and I'm like, "Hey man, why don't you try to do rock and roll? You want to try to do honky tonk?", "No, it's not my thing. Conjunto's my thing, I don't want to change.", "Well, that's the problem right there. You don't want to change. It's not saying I'm taking you away from your roots. I love my roots, I know where I come from, I know where I started from, I never forget it. I still perform that style of music." I'm pretty much, depending on what type of show they hire us for because, I've been hired to perform for private events, for galas, for corporate parties, then festivals, and of course, live venues but, the live venues, festivals, those are where I expand my type of music. And because there's people from everywhere, they enjoy it but, whenever they call me, "Hey, I just want to do Tejano. I just want Tejano music." Fine. I'll go perform that for them because, that's what they want.

[01:00:23] So, I'll perform for the crowd. That's what I do is like, whatever crowd there is, if I see that it's a majority of Mexican-American, or of Mexican descent, then fine. I'll do the polkas, I'll do the corridas, I'll do the rancheras, and they love it. That's all they want to hear. They don't want to hear anything else. Which, is fine

but, I don't get why people kind of try to keep us down, and tell us, "Hey, why don't you just play Tejano?" I'm like, "Why am I gonna do that? That's like just pulling me back down. You know? Wouldn't it be better that you would see a Mexican-American accordion player going out and playing stadiums?" Musicians that I know, all of our dreams ever since we were kids is, playing in a stadium. That's what we want but, nobody wants to put in the work or the effort to get to that point.

[01:01:23] The biggest places I've played at, were with Los Lobos, in front of thousands of people, and big open arenas and stuff like that so, that was my experience. "Man see? These guys can do it, I can do it too. They're Mexican-American. Yeah, they're still playing rock and roll but, look what's happened. They're playing rock and roll, they're playing traditional Mexican music.", and I'm like, "That's what I'm trying to do, just a different style but, it's the same thing. I'm trying to do that." But, there's people that I have reactions with, they don't want me to do that. "No, you're playing accordion, you should stay with traditional Mexican music." I'm like "You know the accordion's not Mexican, right?" Then there's a big conversation with that. I'm like, "We got it from Europe, that where it comes from so, it's not Mexican so, I can do whatever I want with it." I'm like, "All the mariachis that everybody considered true Mexican, is Mariachi." I'm like, "Mariachi's not even Mexican either." I'm like, "Think about it. The horns? String instruments? Not ours.

[01:02:29] The only indigenous thing we probably have from Mexico is a drum, and everybody's had drums, right?" So, like the tambora, that's what we called it so, I tell them like, "All the music you consider Mexican isn't Mexican. We got it from somewhere else." So that right there, kind of gets them into another realm where I'm like, "Oh man, I probably shouldn't have told them that because, now they're gonna argue with me about, oh no, this is real Mexican." I'm like, "No. I've actually studied it. You go back, and it's record where we got that from Europe. String instruments, somewhere from Spain. We don't know where it came from. Like, string instruments, like guitars, we use them for Mexican-American music but, they're not ours. You know, all the stuff we do, the polka, redova, The Waltz, The Chotiz, that's all European music." So I tell them, "Man, we made it our own. You can tell the difference between a European Polka and a Mexican Polka. You can tell the difference but, they're one and the same. They're just played at different speeds, different levels.

[01:03:35] So, I just tell people, I'm like, "Man, you'll probably always have the traditionalists, where they will not want to change at all but, they're the only ones that are very annoyed that they can't hear what they want to hear but, at the same time, they just don't want to support it." So you know, I get into a few arguments with some folks, and I just try to tell them, "This is what I do now. You should be happy that we're trying to better ourselves." Not just that, people that tell me, "Play norteño, play Tejano." I'm like, "I am. I'm actually playing that for other people that don't know what that is so, I'm actually trying to expand that music to other cultures, to other people that have no idea where that comes from." I still show them, even at my shows, there could be a crowd of nothing but English speakers, but I still sing in Spanish, and a lot of people ask me, "Man, that's a great song. What is it about?" So,

I tell them the story behind the songs, of what are the lyrics about because, even though they don't understand Spanish, a lot of them understand the feeling of the music.

[01:04:59] There's some songs where, you can tell the singer is singing with so much heart, that they're just like, "Is that a drinking song? Is that a sad song?" I'm like, "Yeah, it's a sad song. It's a broken heart song." They're like, "Oh cool. Okay." But then, you have songs that I do in Spanish, they're upbeat, they're happy, and they were like, "Oh, is that a drinking song?" And I'm like, "Yeah, but it's a happy drinking song." You have sad drinking songs, and happy drinking songs so, they understand it. So, that's what I tell people that try to keep me down. I was like, "I'm showing the world what our great music is, what Mexican-American music is, and how great it is so, let me do my thing and I'll be able to show everybody else. Not just you guys. You guys already know about it. Now let everybody else have a taste of it." You know? Whenever I run into people that don't want change, I have a big conversation with them and tell them, "Just enjoy it. Enjoy that other people are enjoying it as well, and you might see somebody that is not of Mexican origin, that are playing Tejano." You know?

[01:06:06] I have friends that are white guys, that love Tejano music. They love conjunto music. They don't understand what it's saying but, they're like, "I love the accordion sound." I'm like "Great. Keep on playing it, man." I just tell people, "Let everybody else hear this, and feel what you feel whenever you see it." I know it's a cultural thing where, we grew up with it but, that's a great thing. Is like, show your culture to someone else, so they can understand what it's about. I think that's what we all need is, learning about different cultures because, your culture is your culture. You know about it, you grew up with it but, go learn something, go learn the zydeco culture, go learn the Creole culture, go learn the honky tonk culture, and then you'll understand why people are the way they are. You know? Everybody has their own culture. We all use some of the same spices but, we use them differently in food.

[01:07:06] Some people like crawfish, other people don't. Well, same thing if you tell people, "Menudo, well we have pigs feet in there." Well, some people don't like that. You know? So, I'm like, "Go learn about different cultures and you'll enjoy the culture, the music, and the people." That's what it's all about for me. The most important thing for me is, being able to show my culture to everybody else but, also for them to teach me their culture. So, it's a give and take. That's the type of audience I want to perform in front of, where I meet somebody and they tell me, "Man, your music's great. I never heard anything like it. What are you talking about here in the Spanish stuff?", and then they'll tell me, "Oh, this is the type of music ..." I've had people from like, Istanbul that I've met, and they've showed me their music, and I'm like, "I have no idea what they're saying but, I love the music, and I want to hear more about it. More and more."

[01:08:03] So, that's what I like. I like the give and take that the audience gives me. Then of course, we do run into the traditionalists here and there but, I don't think you'll ever change their mind, unless they want to. Unless someone wants to change

their mind, that's the only way that the times are gonna change for them. If not, they're just gonna stay stuck in the past, pretty much. That's what's kind of sad is that, they don't want to see the change that's happening. I mean, it's happening. You can't go backwards, you just gotta go forward. So yeah, it's been a ride.

Mary: [01:08:40] Tell me more about what people mean when they say, "Tejano", and how maybe different styles of music fit into that. Like Tex Mex and conjunto, and norteño, and maybe some of the differences between them.

Roberto: [01:08:55] Yeah, there's subtle differences. When Mexican-American music just started, of course before the accordion, we had the violin, the trumpet, the sax, and the guitars. It was still the same music, you know, we have the rancheras. It was like, rancheras, corridos, those are just stories that people would ... of course, it'd be about love, be about heartbreak, be about drinking, and then you had the corridos, which were stories about what would happen during the revolution, during times when Texas rangers were killing off Mexican immigrants, just stories. But, when the accordion came into play, if you hear some of the early, early recordings, you really can't tell, which is which. You have Santiago Jimenez Sr., which is Flaco Jimenez's father, who's one of the pioneers. You have Narciso Martínez, and when they're playing polkas, when they're playing waltzes, when they're playing redovas, it still sounds a lot like European music.

[01:10:03] This is before they had the bajo sexto val quito. They were still using whatever instruments they could come across. You know? So, they might probably have a violin or a guitar accompany the accordion but, when it started developing, it just kind of progressed. A lot of the polkas started getting slower because, in the northern part, the polkas, you hopped to them. Those are like the European style polkas and stuff, the Czech polkas, and Polish polkas, you hopped to them. Down here in Texas, because it's so hot, hopping would make you sweat too much so, what musicians did, they slowed down the beat, slowed down the tempo, and they made the, what they call tacuachito, which is the possum dance. Because, you just slide, you glide along the dance floor when you're doing that.

[01:11:00] You had your pioneers, you had Los Alegres de Teran, who were considered the fathers of norteño music. And, during that era in the 40's, going into the 50's, everything sounded the same. There was no Tejano, there was no norteño, there was no conjunto. It was just Mexican-American music. Well, this is because of the history that we have, this is another part that I try to explain to people that are considered traditionalists, I'm like, "During that time, they went through change. You know?" I'm pretty sure some people that were used to playing the polkas the way the Europeans played, didn't want it to slow down. I'm pretty sure they had their traditionalists as well. Well, you have Mexican on the Mexican side of the border, and then Mexicans on the Texas side of the border. The big debate, where did the music come from?

[01:11:55] Some say, "It started in Texas.", some say, "It's in Mexico." Who cares? It's the same music. We play with the same instruments, we all started off the same

way. You start seeing, which I guess conjuntos would like ... Conjunto is just a Spanish term for group. Conjunto became a genre, where you had that style of polka, where they played it a little bit slower. You know, tacuachito so, it's slow. You know, you glide, so the tempo, it's slower but, it's still danceable. Well, on the Mexican side of the border, well, the Mexico side, you had people still performing with the accordion, doing same polkas, same rancheras, but they kept them a little bit upbeat. That's why they call it norteño, because it's the norther part of Mexico. That's norteño.

[01:12:53] Then of course, they developed their own style of playing, such as South Texas did. Then you have conjunto norteño. And, there's subtleties like, the way you play the cumbias. You have a Texas side, the way they play their cumbias, you have the Mexican side, the way that they play their cumbias so, there's a distinction and you can hear it but, it's still the same music. They play the same songs, just in a different way. They're still using accordion. When the bajos sexto came along, that pretty much became the brother to the accordion. From then on, conjunto and norteño music always had bajo sexto and accordion. Of course, the style of playing is a little bit different on the Texas side, you have more of the flashier guys, that are playing because, over here in South Texas, you have the honky tonk, you have the rock and roll.

[01:13:50] I'm not saying they don't have that in Mexico, but we have more of other musicians out here that do perform that alongside with conjunto artists. So, you start seeing accordion players and bajo players trying to do that style with accordions but, norteños kind of stay with the same structure. They don't really deviate from that so, you have the norteño music conjunto. Well come the Tejano era, which it's big band era. And they had big bands from the 40's, even when the conjuntos were coming up but, this is the big band era where, you had the jazz band, the big orchestras, the horns and stuff. So, people decide, "Let's mix that up with the accordion." But, then they decided to get rid of the accordion, and start adding synthesizers, in the late 80's.

[01:14:47] You hear a lot of Mas, and J. Perez, and all that stuff, like all the Tejano artists. They didn't really have accordion. They did start bringing it in here and there but, the majority was the big band sound. They had the horns. They would play jazz music over rancheras, which is like, you know, the guys that were playing Tejano were more of the musicians who actually studied music so, they started getting into more complicated rhythms, started adding jazz and rock and roll to the songs, and then the big band sound. So, there goes the difference between. That's why you have conjunto Tejano norteño but, when you really look at it, throughout the whole picture of it, they're all singing the same songs, they're all playing the same polkas, just in different styles. So, I always tell people, "Why do you say you don't like norteño if the song that you heard over here in conjunto is the exact song they're singing, but they're just doing it on their style?"

[01:16:02] Then norteños go, "I don't like Tejano because, that's not traditional.", "But, they're doing the same corridos and rancheros that you're singing so, how's

that not traditional? It's just a style of playing." All in all, that's why I go back and tell people that are traditionalists, I'm like, "You see all the differences. Of course, they got a little difference but to me, it's all one and the same. We're all singing the same songs, we're all either getting happy and drinking because it's the same drinking song. It can either be a happy drinking song, or a sad drinking song, same one. Same polkas. What's the difference?" I'm like, "You just have a different style of playing it. What would happen if I would play those same rancheras and corridos in a honky tonk rhythm? What would be the difference then? What about if I ... because some of them have sang some of the Spanish songs with the jazz behind it. What's the difference between there?"

[01:17:01] These are Tejano groups that are doing, so like, for somebody to say, "Oh, they're Tejano", like Little Joe y Mi Familia, they have the big band sound. He's like, one of the well known. He was singing English but, they call him a Tejano. They're like, "Oh, that's Tejano music." Yeah, but he's singing English. He's singing all doo-wop stuff. That's not Tejano, that's doo-wop but, they still consider it Tejano so, I'm like, "Why put labels on stuff? It's your people, it's the same people, same music, same instruments, everybody's playing it different but, they're the same songs. Why bother with it?" I hate getting into the conversations, and I've done that to a couple of friends where, I'll have an old Flaco Jimenez record, and I'll play it for them.

[01:17:53] When he was younger, he was playing very, very fast. He was very fast. When he got older, I guess in 30's, this was still in the 60's/70's, he was playing Los Alegres de Teran, and everybody that a norteño, knows who Alegres de Teran are. They're considered the Godfathers of norteño, and they have a distinct way of playing. Well, what a lot of people don't know, is that Flaco, that was his idols. So, he would record just like them. I would put a cassette tape or CD, I'd left there playing. I had my friends that to them, they're only norteño, they don't like Tejano, they don't like conjunto, they don't like anything else but norteño. I'm like, "Ah, cool." I'm like, "You like Flaco?", "Nah. Nah. He's Tejano.", "Okay." So, I'd put it on. He goes, "Man, see? That's what I'm talking, that's norteño. That's what I like.", "That's Flaco Jimenez.", and they'd be like, "What?", "That's Flaco Jimenez.", "Nah, it can't be." I'm like, "That's Flaco Jimenez. He's playing just exactly what you consider norteño." I'm like, "But now that you heard him, do you still consider him Tejano?" I'm like, "You yourself said that, that was norteño music by listening to it." So, I'm like, "Do you consider him a Tejano or norteño now?"

[01:19:22] And they can't tell me. They can't give me an answer. I'm like, "Exactly, so stop giving labels to stuff. Were all playing the same music. Enjoy that everybody plays it different. That's what makes it great." I would be bored, if every single band I've ever seen plays the exact same way, playing the exact same songs. I would be bored with it. I wouldn't want to listen to it. So, it's great that you have the mixture of what people consider conjunto Tejano norteño. I mean, I didn't grow up with banda. I would listen to it here and there but, it's just not my cup of tea. I like big band sound but, I don't like listening all the time. So, banda music doesn't bother me, they're still doing corridos and rancheras but, they're doing it to their style. They're stories because of course, here in South Texas and North Mexico, the border

towns, there's all these stories of what happens here. Well, all their doing in banda music is, bringing the stories from the west coast, and bringing them to us.

[01:20:16] They telling us what happens over there because, over there, I have friends that live on the west coast, they're like, "Oh, I like Tejano and Tex Mex, and conjunto, and norteño.", but all the stories are from here. So even in songs, you'll hear small towns, like Corpus Christi. You'll hear about San Antonio. They call it San Anto. You hear about the border towns, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, and Leon, the states over there. They're listening to it on the west coast, but I'm like, "I don't know where those places are at." Well, it's the same thing with them. They're singing their songs. We don't know where something over there, talking about like Sinaloa. Sinaloa's on the west coast, and they're talking about that. We still have Juarez, which is right there on the border of Texas and stuff. That's in the middle so, they talk about Juarez too, and that stuff but, it's all one and the same. It's one and the same.

[01:21:20] There's people that will always say, "No, there's a difference between them.", but to me, everything's the same. It's all the same to me because, it's the same music. You're not really changing anything. You're still singing Spanish, still singing, like I said, same songs, same polkas. Nothing's really changed for me. Of course, some people have taken out the accordion, put in synthesizers. Fine. There's people that have taken away the bajo sexto, and have played guitar. They're still doing the melodies the same way, it's just that they're playing on guitar. It sounds different but, it's still the same. That for me, I don't really see a difference between them when that comes around.

Mary: [01:22:00] Tell me about performing with some of pioneers of the conjunto music that you've mentioned. Or [inaudible 01:22:07]

Roberto: [01:22:09] That has been a trick. I have been able luckily, to perform with some of the pioneers, and some of the pioneers, I've been able to hang out with. Of course, Hometown Boys had their own style, and they were the first Mexican-American group to ever be inducted into the West Texas Hall of Fame with Buddy Holly. So, in their own right, they had a unique sound, and they created their own sound. Some people call them conjunto, others called them Tejano but, it was just their version of it. Of course, those guys taught me what it was to be a musician, alongside with my teacher, who was part of Roberto Pulido Y Los Clasicos. Now, Roberto Pulido Y Los Clasicos, they were considered pioneers of the big Tejano band era because, they were one of the first groups to incorporate saxophone with accordion, and have the drums, and instead of bajosexto, they would have just use guitar but no synthesizers. So, they still had the rancho sound but, with not quite a big band, but somewhat of a big band because, they would have horns. So, they were pioneers of that.

[01:23:29] I got to hang out with them, and of course my teacher, being part of their group, they told me about how they started, about how in the beginning, nobody really wanted to hire them because, they were a new band, new sound, that nobody ... But, then little by little, people started listening to them and like, "Oh, I like this

sound.", so, they started getting bigger and bigger. Then, when you come across some of the pioneers that started from the 40's and 50's, because Roberto Pulido and Hometown Boys, I'm talking about like, this is the 70's and 80's, and stuff when they were coming up but, some of the guys that were still around from the 40's and 50's like Flaco Jimenez, I've been able to sit down with Flaco and half the time, he doesn't remember who I am, I'm pretty sure. We partied together quite a number of times but, being around him, he has so many stories.

[01:24:26] He talks about like, "yeah, I remember playing in the dirt before there was amplification." Same thing with Augie Meyers. Augie Meyers was part of Texas Tornados and so, I got to play with Texas Tornados, opened up for them, and sat down with Augie. I didn't even know this but, he told me that, here in Houston, he used to come in Houston on navigation, and he used to play all these rinky dinky little bars, and the bar owners would ask him, "Hey, would you have a gun? Do you have one?", and he goes "No, why?", and the bar owners would give him a gun. They're like, "Here, hold this, and just keep it with you while you're in here." He said that there would be stabbings and shootings while they were playing, so the bar owners would be like, "Come in the back room." Cops would come in, clean it up, "All right. Get back on stage and start performing."

[01:25:14] I'm like, "Wow, man. Really?" So yeah. They taught me about some of the olden days of how it was performing. Of course now, they're living legends but back then, it took me back to like, "Okay, they did exactly what I'm doing now. They're paying their dues, they're running through rinky dinky bars, having to mess with people that don't want to pay them, and trying to figure out how to get paid, and traveling. So, all that stuff, they did exactly what I'm doing. Being able to listen to the stories, and listening to them, and tell me like, "yeah. Back then, we didn't make the amount of money we make now." Because, they were the pioneers. Flaco and his dad, and stuff, they would only play for private parties, or for the community and stuff but, they wouldn't get paid. They'd still have to have jobs.

[01:26:09] Flaco would tell me, "His dad had to work." Narciso Martínez, who people mainly consider the father of Tejano music, late into his 80's, he was working at the Brownsville Zoo, and he was a pioneer. Everybody gives him credit but, he had no money. He was still poor. So, coming from guys who actually lived it, it's a lot different than reading it from a text book but, actually talking to somebody who lived it. Same thing, my teacher, he's considered a pioneer as well. He said, "He used to work in the cotton fields, and picking strawberries, and cherries, and cotton, and all that. All up and down from South Texas to California." He said, "He traveled all over the place.", and he said that the way to get out of it, was through music. That was his only salvation. He goes, "It was hard work, man. I was a little kid, at the age of five, working with my parents and stuff.", and he told me that one day, when they were poor, they didn't have much money, they were pickers. So, they would go all up and down southwest of the United States, and just pick whatever for work.

[01:27:35] He said, "His first time he ever performed when he was 10 years old." Someone told him, "Hey, go play for this gentleman here." They gave him 10 bucks.

Well, 10 buck back then, he said that he thought he won the lotto because, 10 bucks in the 40's, I mean, that was a lot of money back then, especially for him. That's when he found out, he could make more money doing music, and provide for his family. I mean, it was hard. He even tried to convince me, my parents didn't want me to become a musician. They gave me music lessons because, that's what I wanted but, when they started figuring out that I was going down the road of being a musician, they told my teacher, convinced him not to. So, my teacher sat me down, and he was very blunt. He told me, "Look, you want to be a musician. I'm gonna tell you what I went through. Now, this is my personal experience." I was like, "Okay."

[01:28:34] I'm like, "Back when I was young, I used to drink, I used to smoke, but I never did drugs. That's an option that all musicians have but, it's up to you whether you're gonna do it or not." By the time he came to me in the 60's, he was off smoking, he didn't drink but, he said, "In his younger days, he did." He goes, "There's women all over, there's drugs all over, there's just temptation. You're on the road most of the year. You're gonna miss funerals, you're gonna miss anniversaries, weddings, birthday parties. It's gonna be a crappy life if you do this." He told me about the good and the bad. You know, he told me, "You'll make some money, you'll get to travel if that's what you want but, you have to be prepared with what comes with everything."

[01:29:29] I didn't understand that until I started playing music, and started actually traveling, touring, where I started having family members dying, and I would just get a call, "Hey, your aunt passed away, or your cousin passed away.", "Well shit. What am I gonna do? I can't go back home, there's no way for me to go back. I have no money or plane tickets home. Who's gonna take me home?" I was half way across the country. You know? I was in California, I was in Chicago, I was in New York when all this stuff happening. "Oh, your cousin's getting married.", "Well, give them my blessings." I'm like, "I'm sorry, I can't be there." Then, I finally understood what he meant.

[01:30:09] I never got to meet his sons but, he told me that his sons, all of them know how to play, not one of them want to become a musician, because of the lifestyle they saw their dad go through. I finally understood what he meant so, I mean, I know it's tough, and I've dealt with it now. Before he passed, my first tour I told him how it was, and how I slept in a few cars, or people's houses, people's floors, grass. He goes, "Well, can you deal with it, or do you want to quit?" I'm like, "No, I can deal with it." He goes, "All right. Then you'll be all right as a musician." From then on, he just told my parents, "He's gonna be a musician. There's nothing you can do about it." So having him, that went through all that stuff on a personal level, and him being one of my mentors and telling me what it was like, it kind of got me mentally prepared for everything that I was gonna go through.

[01:31:07] Being able to meet Esteve Jordan who, another legend that passed away on us but Esteve Jordan was one of those guys, that was ahead of his time that, everybody considered him Tejano but yet again, nobody wanted to go support him because he was too out there. He was already playing jazz, and Cuban music, salsa,

and all these rock and roll rifts and everything on accordion. He was considered the Jimi Hendrix of recording. You have this living legend here, and this was when I was in Skarnales, we would go travel San Antonio. Every Friday night, Steve Jordan, Esteve Jordan, El Parche is what they called him. He would be playing at this very small venue, Salute. It's not there anymore, and I got to play at Salute. That was one of my goals, was to play at Salute because Esteve Jordan and all the San Antonio legends would go there and play. The West Side Horns, you know? Flaco would be in there. [inaudible 01:32:12], all these guys.

[01:32:17] We wouldn't play until midnight for Skarnales, and I was down the street, and I would tell my buddies, "Hey, y'all want to go see a legend, man? Esteve Jordan.", "Nah, we're gonna be here." I'm like, "All right. I'll see y'all later." So, I would go, I'd pay 10 bucks at the door, and I mean the place is so small you could only fit like 12 people in there, the max. I mean, it was tiny. There would be Esteve Jordan on stage with his kids, two of his sons. I remember one day, the first time I saw him, I went in there. I didn't get to talk to him. The second time I went, I went in there just like normal, and got to see him perform. During one of his breaks, they left. They went outside. I'm like, "Oh, I need to go get something from my ..." I think I had forgotten my phone or something so, I went outside, and I had a pickup truck at the time.

[01:33:07] I went outside, and low and behold, sitting on my tailgate was Esteve Jordan with his sons. I'm not gonna tell anything to Esteve Jordan. Like what am I gonna tell him? Like, "Hey, get off my truck."? He decided to just open up the tailgate and just sit down. I'm like, "All right. Whatever" so, I opened the truck, and he goes, "Oh, I'm sorry bro." I was like, "It's all right, man. I came to see you, man. I play accordion too, I'm playing down the street. But, I love you guys, man. I've grown up with you guys." And, he was very particular with people. He didn't like to take picture, he didn't like to sign autographs. He was very particular with people.

[01:33:40] He didn't like talking to people that much, he just had his circle. But for some reason that night, he started talking to me, and his sons were next to him. He introduced me to everybody, and I'm like, "Hey man. How you doing? I'm Robert, I'm from Houston." He goes, "Oh, Houston man. I've had a lot of parties over there." And he just started telling me about his stories. I'm like, "Man, I can't believe I'm talking to Esteve Jordan, like this one on one." Usually you'll only see him at the show so, you can't really talk to them. You can only say, Hey, what's going on? Give me an autograph, or shake my hand." No, but he was on my tailgate, sitting down.

[01:34:28] I thought he had a cigarette in his hand but, it wasn't a cigarette, it was a joint. He just started smoking, he goes, "Oh, I'm sorry. Hey, you want some?" And, I mean, I'm not a weed smoker but in that moment, I didn't think twice. I'm like, "Yeah man. Yeah." So, here I am, smoking weed with Esteve Jordan, El Parche. We sat out there for about 10-15 minutes, just talking to him and his crew, telling me stories and stuff, and asking me what I was doing. I'm like, "Man, I'm trying to do what you do but, I can't." I'm like, "You're just way out there for me but, I want to do what you do. I want to play all these types of music on my accordion." He goes, "Well, you

know what man?" He goes, "Just do what I did. Tell everybody to fuck off, and you just play your way. That's it. No matter what." I'm like, "Thanks man. I really appreciate it." I'm like, "I'm gonna go back inside. You want a beer?" He goes, "Yeah man." He goes, "You know what? Don't worry about it. Come on."

[01:35:31] So, we go back inside, and this is before I knew who Azeneth was, who was the owner of the bar. A few years later, we became really close friends, because I was performing there. But, we walked back into the bar, and he goes, "Hey, Azeneth. Get this guy whatever he wants. It's on us." Oh great. I'm like, Really?" He goes, "Yeah man. Have a beer on us." He goes, "Have a seat." And, he got up on stage, and he goes, "Everybody, this is Houston over here." He didn't remember my name, he just remembered Houston. He goes, "Hey Houston. What's up man?" I'm like, "Nothing man." He goes, "Let me jam for you a little bit." I was maybe one of six people in there, and I'm like, "Wow dude. I'm having my own private concert." And this is after, I'm sitting down, and I just can't believe I smoked weed with Esteve Jordan.

[01:36:26] I was thinking about it. I'm like, "And he bought me a beer. How cool is that?" Right in the middle of their set, I waited until they got done. It's such a small place that, you could hear everyone talking. So, I'm like, "Esteve, thank you so much for your hospitality." And, I told, "Bye.", to Azeneth, who was the owner behind the bar. I was like, "I have to go play now." He goes, "All right Houston. Houston, keep it up brother." He goes, "Don't let nobody get you down, man. Just do what you do, man.", and right then and there, he kind of blanked out, and just started playing, like out of nowhere. I'm like, "What the hell is going on?"

[01:37:09] You know, people had told me stories of Esteve Jordan but, he would just flip out, and just play. And then, I saw him a couple times after that, and of course he didn't remember me but, when I told him, "Hey, it's Houston." He goes, "Oh, Houston. From Salute." So, he remembered that but, there was a couple times I saw him, and I didn't want to bother him because, there was too many people trying to get at him, trying to take pictures. And, he would get so upset, to take pictures and do autographs, he would hate that. I never asked him for a photograph, but I did ask him, I'm like, "Hey man. I hate to ask you this but, can you give me an autograph? I don't mean to bother you like that." And, this was before we went back into the bar.

[01:37:55] I actually had a CD case, a cover of him, and I had a cleaning cloth for the accordion. So, I asked him, "Can you sign both of these for me?", and he did. So, I still have those, and that's like big memories that I have with him, and you know, I was like, "I was so grateful to have met him, have performed." I got kicked out of Discovery Green with Flaco the last time that we played together for Texas Tornados. We were in the green room, and just chit-chatting about my teacher, because he knew him very well. You know, we were just chit-chatting, and he was drunk and he didn't remember, and I was drunk too. This was after the shows, after everybody left, and it was only musicians in there. He told his son, "Hey, go bring my accordion." I was like, "Oh great. He's gonna perform. All right." I was like, "Man, what are you gonna play?" He goes, "Play? I'm not playing." I'm like, "Well, why you

want your accordion?" He goes, "For the beer." I was like, "What?" He goes, "Just wait man."

[01:39:05] So, his son brought his son in, took the accordion out, he goes, "Go put the accordion on the bus." And all the leftover beer, that was inside the cooler, he just put it inside his accordion case. He goes, "I'm gonna go keep partying in the room, if you want to come up." I'm like, "Man, I can't hang with you, man." This is like a 70 year old man telling me, and I'm like, "I can't hang with this man. He's out drinking me." But before we left, we were making so much noise and laughing, and just talking because, Augie was there still, and Louie, their singer, and Shawn Sahm was there, and we were talking, and they were telling about the old days, and just laughing and stuff. But, me and Flaco were being very, very loud because, we were just drunk. So, the actual security guards, they're like, "Are these the accordion players?" And of course, everybody's like, "Yeah man. They're always the trouble makers." They're like, "Man, you gotta get these accordion players out of here. They're making a lot of noise. People are complaining." One of the staff, they're trying to close down a part, and me and Flaco are there, sitting down drinking, and not getting up, and everybody's trying to get us out.

[01:40:20] Yeah, when he told me to go up to keep partying, I'm like, "Man, I can't. I'm going home." He goes, "All right. I'll see you when I see you.", and he just went his separate way so, believe able to do that with Flaco and Esteve Jordan was ... Who would ever think that you were ever gonna be seeing your idols, and doing what you're doing with them, in private. In private, of course. I never got to meet one of my other idols, Valerio Longoria but, I always wanted to meet him. I got to meet Mingo Saldivar. I chatting with him a little bit. Those guys to me, those are some of the pioneers that I'd grown up with, and especially with my teacher, I spent so much time with my teacher, I didn't consider him a legend in my eyes, he was just my friend. You know?

[01:41:11] Being able to talk with all those guys, and have all those stories that they told me from back in the day, that kind of inspired me to go and doing more research on, not just Mexican-American music, but all sorts of music that I've been playing. So, that kind of got me into doing research of roots music. All roots music that I've tried doing, whether it be blues, rock and roll, country, or Tex Mex, and all that. Even zydeco. I've been slowly trying to teach myself all about the roots music, where it started, where it comes from, who were the pioneers of it, and just because now that I'm doing so many genres, now I'm getting to meet some of the guys that are out there, that are considered legends, and stuff like that, which is great. Which now, I'm expanding not only with the pioneers of Mexican-American music, but I'm expanding to, being able to see other people from other genres so, that's been great. That's been awesome. Awesome.

[01:42:14] Yeah, those are I think, my stories that I still consider and hold dear to my heart, that some people don't even believe some of those stories that happened. I tell them, "I don't care whether you believe them or not, they're my stories. That's what I went through, and I actually was there with them so, that was just my

moment. My personal moment where, nobody else was around. Everybody was like, "How come you didn't take pictures?" I was like, "at that moment, you don't take pictures. You just live in the moment.", and that's what I did. I'm like, "Oh man. This is awesome. This is awesome. I can't ask for anything better." Years later, I ran into Esteve Jordan's sons, and they still remembered me. They still remembered who I was, and we actually performed together at this place called, Jovita's in Austin, which is no longer around either but, we got to perform together. They were like, "Hey man. You were the guy that went over there to visit my Pa." I was like, "Yeah man, I would go over there on Fridays when I would go play in town." They were like, "Yeah, yeah. We remember you man." I was like, "Ah, that was so awesome for them to recognize me after so many years." So, that was a treat.

Mary: [01:43:24] Roberto, you've mentioned your teacher a number of times.

Roberto: [01:43:28] Oh, Leonel Pulido.

Mary: [01:43:29] Thank you.

Roberto: [01:43:30] Yeah, I'm sorry. Yeah, Leonel Pulido.

Mary: [01:43:32] You may have mentioned it, I might have just missed it.

Roberto: [01:43:33] No, Leonel Pulido, I didn't say his name. Leonel Pulido, he was the guy that started it all for me. Started it all, and then of course, Ricky Martinez, who's Jazzy Martinez and Ramon Martinez. Those were the guys from The Hometown Boys. Those are the guys that kind of like, without them and my teacher, I would not be doing what I'm doing right now. They're the ones who gave me everything that I needed to get mentally prepared, and musically prepared to do that.

Mary: [01:44:07] What would you say about playing music that we haven't already covered in this interview?

Roberto: [01:44:16] That? Just playing music that we haven't covered here, I would just tell people, "Go, and enjoy that music." If you can find it somewhere, go and listen to it." Because, a lot of people, they haven't gotten to hear me play some ska and reggae. Which, I've done shows from before but of course, that was in the early days of Skarnales. Then, when I opened up for Toots & the Maytals, I got to do a lot of Ska/Reggae. At times, during the Skarnales years, we did a Ramones tribute, and a Class tribute, and every single song that I performed with them, was with the accordion. So, a lot of people that I even did that because, it's just so obscure, that I don't even think there's any recordings of it or anything. Then, when we did Ace of Spades with Umbrella Man, people freaked out. They were like, "What are you doing? You're playing Ace of Spades on accordion.", and people freaked out.

[01:45:24] We haven't played in a couple years now, and then we did Pink Floyd as well. So, yeah. I still think I'm like 20 something years old. I'm 31 but, I feel like a kid because, I still want to do so much with the accordion. I want to go out and

experiment with any music that I come across. Because, not that I get to travel because of music, when I go to different parts of the country, I've been to Canada, Mexico, across the country, and across the pond. I was in Switzerland doing a country festival over there. But, it gives me the opportunity of learning about music in that area, and that's what I want. I want to learn about music everywhere I go because, you never know what you might find. You might find someone doing, probably the same thing you're trying to do, on the other side of the country or the other side of the world.

[01:46:34] To me, that's the biggest gift that I can get, is being able to just listen to all sorts of music, all sorts of genres because, I'm the type of guy that, I just want to go, and go. I'll sit down, this is something that I've kept very personal but, every once in a while, I'll buy season tickets to the ballet. People are like, "You like the ballet?" I'm like, "The ballet, not so much. Not the dancing part." I'm like, "I can see the storyline but, I go for the music." I'll sit there and listen to the music because, there is a story that they're doing through dance, but to me, I imagine another story. Somehow I close my eyes and listen to the music because, the music gives you emotion so, I want to go listen to that emotion. I want to go hear the sadness, and the happiness that they play for the ballet. Then of course, going to the symphony, going to see an orchestra and stuff. I really enjoy that because, that kind of gives you ideas of, "Oh man."

[01:47:52] Now that I've started writing songs, it hasn't been too long but, I've been writing songs for a while but, those are the ones that give me the inspiration and ideas. Like okay, how do I want the audience to feel? Do I want them to feel happy? Do I want them to feel sad? Do I want them to feel happy and sad in the same song? You know, some songs that I've written, because of my background, I have an English degree, because of my background, I create stories. So, a lot of people think, "Did that really happen?" I'm just like, "No, I just created that. That's my own imagination, and that's what I create." Then, there's a lot of songs that I've been writing, where it's just stuff that happened to me on the road, or throughout life, and I'll start writing songs about that.

[01:48:41] I tell people, and it doesn't have to be reality, I make stuff up you know, just to create the music, create the sound. Just like, if you go see the ballet or the symphony, you're there to hear the emotions that the music's bringing out. So yeah, for me, any type of genre, go out and listen to it. It don't matter who you are, just go out and learn about it. You'll be so much enriched. Your life will be better, just by having heard that before because, it'll stay in your head and you'll see the world differently. You'll see it way different, and that's what I love. I love doing that.

Mary: [01:49:21] You described many important moments in your musical career. Which experiences had the biggest impact on you?

Roberto: [01:49:29] The biggest impact, well of course first and foremost, was Leonel Pulido. He was the only musician that ever sat me down, and told me about the horror stories about what they have to go through. No musician's gonna tell you that

because, that's just their life. Everybody has their own horror stories that they have to go through, and I met a lot of musicians that were divorced three, four times, because of the lifestyle. But, Leonel Pulido was the first one to sit me down and tell me what I was in for so, that was one of the biggest moments, where I had to decide, "Okay, do I want to do this for a living or not?" Because, he told me, he goes, "You have to choose. I'm not gonna choose for you, and I'm not gonna tell you not to do it but, you're gonna have to find out for yourself. If this is what you're gonna do, be prepared for the consequences, whether they be good or bad."

[01:50:32] That's what he told me, and that was what made my decision because at the time, I was still young, still learning under him, I was still in high school, and I was playing baseball. I made my varsity team when I was a freshman so, I was pretty good at it. When I decided to give that up, because that was my other big dream. I wanted to play in the big leagues, of course, playing ball. The other thing is, my coach was trying to figure out if we could find a scholarship for me, so I could play ball on the college level. Because, he said that I was good enough to do it, it's just more hard work, and of course, I could have done it. But I started thinking about it like, "Well, do I want to waste my years playing ball, having the dream of playing baseball on the college level, and hopefully going to AAA or the major leagues?"

[01:51:39] Music was always my first passion. I was like, "Well, if I do music, who knows what type of lifestyle I'm gonna have." Because, that was the other thing. I didn't know if I was gonna make any money out of it. You know, I still don't make much. I make enough to live off on, but that was a choice that I made. But, Leonel, he helped me in my decision of making that. At one point he even told me, he goes, "If you just become a musician, and just play only as a local musician, would you be bothered by it?" I'm like, "No, as long as I'm playing music, I don't care. I don't have to make money, I just want to play." Of course, I have to find a way to survive so, I try everything I can to make ends meet but of course, the big dream is to make enough money to where I don't have to worry about it but, right now, I've got the starving artist syndrome.

[01:52:47] Yeah, it was a big decision. The other guys that helped me out too were Hometown Boys. They gave me the confidence. After putting me on stage and putting me in the line of fire, they gave me the confidence to be like, "I can do this. No matter who I join, or who I'm with, I can do this." So, them to were the most important group of people in my life, to get that. Especially, them through the music side, and without my parents, my dad, Roberto. He's Jr, Roberto Ramirez Jr., I'm the third, and my mom, Maria. Without their support, they have been the greatest parents I could ever ask for. My dad, of course when I was playing little league, he didn't have much time to come to my games, which I was sad about because, all my other friends' dads were around.

[01:53:45] My mom would come every once in a while but, even her, she couldn't come all the time. Then, my mom didn't drive so, we would have to take the bus, or I'd have to walk to the games, and my dad was always working. So, it wasn't until I became a musician, my dad, we found a mutual place where me and him could hang

out together so, even to this day, my dad comes to my shows. He'll drive me, he wants to drive, and he wants to come hang out with me. I find that to be the biggest support that I have, is my parents backing me up. Once I said, "This is what I'm doing." I went to school for my parents, I got my degree, and my mom wanted me to do that because, out of the entire family, I'm the first one to have a college degree so, she wanted me to have something to fall back on. I'm like, "Mom, I don't think I'm gonna ever go to get another regular job." I'm like, "I think I'm gonna do this for a living.", and she let me do it so, I'm very proud of having them support me, as much as they've done.

[01:54:51] Like I said, those people, those have been the most important people in my moments of need. Those are the guys that have guided me to do what I do. Without them, I don't know where I would be at, at all. I don't know.

Mary: [01:55:08] Well, we've made it through all of my questions.

Roberto: [01:55:10] Okay.

Mary: [01:55:11] Is there something that I should have asked you, that I didn't ask you? Or is there something that you'd like to add?

Roberto: [01:55:16] No, not really. I'm pretty sure we covered everything else. I mean, we went over all the Mexican stuff that I grew up with, and some of my times with the musicians. What else is there? Well, as far as the traveling part, traveling has been a big thing in my life where, growing up, didn't have much money. The only place we would travel to was Mexico because, we would go visit family. I used to hate that when I was a kid because, I was like, "Why can't we go to California? Why can't we go to New York?" Well, we didn't have money for it, and my parents, to them, they didn't know anybody. I was like, "Well yeah, we'll get ..." but, we didn't have money for a hotel room so, I was like, "Man." Growing up as a little kid, I was [inaudible 01:56:08] like, "What is gonna take me around the world? How am I gonna do that but, without me having to pay for it?" So of course, music was always there but, then when I was playing baseball, I'm like, "Well, maybe baseball might take me. I might be a star." But, when I got older, and finally decided to do music, I'm like, "Music's gonna take me.", and it has.

[01:56:27] It's taken me around different places, where I haven't had to pay a dime to go to, and got paid for it. One of my other gifts is that, I get to travel the world, and meet different people, go to new places without having to pay for it, because I'm playing music. I get the itch sometimes where, if I'm here in Houston for a while, for a couple months, it doesn't matter if I leave for a weekend, a week, a month, two months, but I have to get out of the city, just because it's so much chaos. It's just always chaos around the city so, sometimes I want to go to another city with different chaos, but it's different so I can handle it. Sometimes, I like to go out to the country, and just drive. Just drive. So, I'll do that. And then, this summer, none of my normal contacts from out of state had called me to do shows so, I'm like, "Man, what am I gonna do with myself?" Because, last year, I was in Canada for two months.

[01:57:38] This summer, I've been stuck here in Houston. But, I don't think I'll ever, ever move out of Houston. Houston has been my home, I was born and raised in the city, and there's so much to live for in this city. That's another thing, is that there's so much history, so much music, so much culture, just in the city alone, that I don't want to live anywhere else. Houston has always been my heart and soul. That's another thing that makes me, is Houston. There's so many places here that I love to go to, there's places I've never been to in Houston, that I want to go try and visit. I think one of my next goals, I told my buddies that, we gotta save up enough money so, we can go bar hopping to bars that we've never been to, and it doesn't matter how expensive they are, we at least gotta try them once.

[01:58:26] That goes hand in hand with my music. With my music thing, I just want to travel and go meet people. I want to do that for as long as I can. However long I have, I wanna just keep doing that, is traveling. Don't matter whether it's within the city, or outside the city, I just want to go visit people. I want to go see how other people live, what other music, what sparks their intrigue, what music do they listen to? Do they listen to other music? What if I show them my music? That's what I think about all the time. I want to go find out what other people are doing. That's what I want to do because, it's fun. It's fun meeting people, and meeting different cultures, learning about different cultures. I packed on a few pounds ever since I became a musician, because I just like to eat. I like to eat different foods that they give me. Indian food, Pakistanian food, of course, Chinese food and all that. But you get something like sushi and Japanese food. All sorts of food, and especially if it's homemade. I love it. I love it. I just want to taste it. I want to see what other people eat around the world. All that revolves around music for me so, music is there. I can't get rid of it.

[01:59:50] Music takes me places, lets me eat in the different places, lets me meet different people, and it's everywhere. It's everywhere. That's what I enjoy about life is that, music is all around, and I get to enjoy everything that comes with it. Whether it be good or bad, I just enjoy it. I have no regrets. Up until now, I have no regrets, and I don't think I'll ever have any regrets. The decisions I've made on my personal level, of course, my ex-girlfriend left because of the music lifestyle. I haven't really had any serious relationships here and there, just kind of little flings here and there but, the music lifestyle's too much for them. So, people tell me, "When I'm gonna settle down?" I'm like, "I don't know." I'm like, "Whenever I find that woman that'll put up with all my crap that they gotta deal with." Up until now, I'm just enjoying the ride. That's what I'm doing, is just enjoying the ride, and hopefully I continue. I want to continue adding more stories to my life, more chapters to see what else I can come up with.

Mary: [02:01:07] Well, thank you Roberto for your time, and sharing your expertise and knowledge. This concludes the interview with Roberto Rodriguez.

Roberto: [02:01:18] All right, thank you.

Mary: [02:01:19] You're welcome.