

Interviewee: Roberto Rodriguez

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:           [:00] Okay, the numbers are running.

Roberto:       [:03] All right.

Mary:           [:05] Today is August 22, 2017. I am Mary Manning with the University of Houston. I am working on a project called Community Practice, Identity Building in the Gulf Coast Sound. I am at my home with Roberto Rodriguez who is an accordion player and has kindly agreed to share his knowledge and experience about playing bass [should be accordion] in bands that he has played.

[:33] My first question, I guess we'll start with the first one, is describe the musical genres you perform.

Roberto:       [:41] The ones I perform now, I started off with tejano conjunto around the age of 15-16 and then I started adding norteño, which is a close version of it, but it wasn't until about 2002 when I joined Skarnales, Los Skarnales, I started add repertoire to my genres. I learned about punk, I learned about ska reggae, I started performing rockabilly and a little bit of blues on there and it wasn't until after that, after the few years I was with them I think at the end of 2006, when I started performing with Nick Gaitan & The Umbrella Man, we started adding country and more blues to it but then went back to traditional Tex-Mex. I kind of added all those genres together and that's what I do now.

[1:49] Never been classically trained. Everything's pretty much just been by ear and by learning it on the spot whenever I would get up with bands. I recently started getting up with my friend Ruben Moreno, only been up on stage with him twice. I don't know how to play zydeco or any Creole Cajun but I've learned how to mimic it to an extent to where I can get away with it but that's something I need I want to learn myself. I want to learn how to properly play traditional zydeco and Creole but the majority of the genres that they call me for are for country blues, a little bit of rock and roll and of course Tex-Mex and norteño, cumbias but those are the genres that are mainly what I do right now. It's a bunch.

Mary:           [2:49] Very cool. Describe how the different genres your perform combine or influence

each other, if they do.

Roberto: [2:58] Yeah, they do. I've started noticing that there's a few, whenever I'm playing traditional Mexican music, just Tex-Mex, norteño, conjunto, it reminds me a lot of country music, just in Spanish. Even though most country music, they have fiddle, they have either lap steel or pedal steel. They have mandolins at times. Some of the runs that I learned in country music, I tried to put them on the accordion. Some of them work, some of them don't, but because they're so close to each other as far as rhythms, they usually work out pretty well, so I've noticed myself using some country riffs that are used either mandolin, fiddle or the steel and I kind of put them into accordion in one form or another.

[3:55] The other one, as well, is that learning how to play blues kind of gave me a different approach to where some of the blues runs actually fit within the Tex Mex songs that I'm performing sometimes. I started blending a lot of the blues, a lot of the country, and then whenever I do perform rock style songs, I put a lot of blues in there as well. It does interchange with every genre I'm performing. Every little thing that I have learned from different musicians or just picked up from playing, I try to see if they work.

[4:43] I've actually tried what they call power chords on guitar that are used in the heavy metal and stuff. I've actually tried playing power chords over certain songs on accordion and they do not sound good at all, so I have to go back and figure out what intervals and what kind of harmonies work best whenever I try to play accordion in music that normally does not have accordion in it. Yeah, I try using all those different genres. I apply it, depending on what song it is, I try to apply one form of those genres into it to see if it comes out, to see if it works.

Mary: [5:30] Describe how audience interaction influences what you play and how you play it.

Roberto: [5:39] Oh. With the interaction with people, I think it comes during just at the time that we perform because most songs that we perform are already pretty much, we know what we're going to be performing already before we start performing them just because that's how we recorded them or we built the song in a certain way but there are times that, during a song, we extend it to give it a longer life in order for us to perform kind of in the moment solos, I guess would you call them and that is based on how I react, seeing how the crowds react. The crowd's not really into, I'm not saying really into, but we perform in front of crowds where we've been kind of like the background music in a way. You could tell that some people were listening or most are listening but not really paying attention, so whenever we come to those moments, I'll do kind of a minimal solo off the top of my head, I guess just to get by, because nobody's really paying attention.

[7:09] Whenever we've performed in front of crowds where the whole attention is on us and everybody's yelling, dancing, especially if they're just dancing or just having a good time, I myself have a better feeling. I guess the happy feeling that I have just gives me ideas and I just start performing off the top of my head solos which might be very embellished at times. Sometimes I even jump into the crowd and start dancing with them. I've been known to do that. That gets the crowd going a lot. I've made the crowd

do the line dance with me around the venue. I've had people clapping, cheering. I've thrown my accordion up in the air, doing a lot of crazy and wild maneuvers just to kind of get the crowd's reaction, and it's just so much fun at that moment.

[8:13] It's really more of just like an instinct and more of a kind of like in the moment type of ordeal. At that time I'm not really thinking. I just open my mind and whatever comes out comes out. I don't really think about what's going on. I try to stay within the realm, as well as that's around the time where I use the different genres that I know, throwing in the blues scales there, the country scales, the Tex Mex scales, different runs. That's the moment where I try to convert all of them at once and just see what's the craziest thing I can come up with during those performances in front of crowds. Those are exciting.

Mary: [8:55] Tell me more about the different environments that these type of happenings happen in. Would this happen more at a festival or a bar or a wedding? Where might...can you say?

Roberto: [9:18] Yeah. Festivals, definitely. The festivals, because it's such a big stage and everybody at a festival, not everybody but the people in front of the stage, they're paying attention to the band and that's a great, great place even though sometimes there's times where we play early during a festival and there's not that big of a crowd but there's still a big enough crowd to where the people that are actually listening, they could be one or two people that are looking at you and you have to give it your all when you're at a festival. You'll be able to turn people's heads while you're at a festival.

[9:57] Bars, the same thing. Half the people are at the bar just socializing, the other half are actually paying attention and dancing. Your main goal is to work for those people that are dancing and having a good time, paying attention to the group, but once they start getting more emotional and happier, that kind of grabs the attention of the rest of the bar, so that helps out as well. Weddings, the same thing. You want to make sure that everybody has fun at a wedding.

[10:31] Then there's certain venues where we play. Sometimes there's restaurants that we perform in and they don't really want us to be the focal point of attention so we have to perform kind of like just background music. There, every once in a while you'll get someone to ask for a certain song or you'll actually make eye contact with a few people, but I mostly notice that children are the ones that are more excited than anybody to see us when we're at a restaurant, or I guess in a lounge, just like kind of where they want background music as well, where the atmosphere is basically just sitting down to socialize, either drinking or eating. Especially restaurants, children are the most fun to watch because they don't care where they're at. They dance, they clap their hands, they yell, just because they're listening to music, which gets their parents involved a little bit.

[11:45] That's pretty much as far as it goes whenever we're in venues at that point. We don't really go all out whenever we're at the restaurants or the lounges and stuff. That's more kind of like we do our job, make sure we have good music for them but we don't really go all out like the way we do at festivals and bars because we have more freedom

at those places because we know that everybody's going to be having a drink and socializing and wants to enjoy the night so we kind of get a little bit more rowdy at those types of locations.

Mary: [12:19] Tell me whether and how dancing matters to the band when they're playing.

Roberto: [12:29] Dancing is a very, very big part of what, especially the bands that I perform in. That is kind of like the main focus of what we want to happen at all of our shows. With every band that I perform in, that is the main goal is to have people dancing and enjoying themselves because what we try to provide, our genres that we do, whether it could be rock, blues, country, Tex Mex, especially cumbias, those are meant to get up and dance to. That is our main goal is to have people dance. It doesn't matter. It could be, we've had only two people dancing at the time or we've had the whole dance floor packed but that, to us, lets us know that we're doing a good job.

[13:21] When we don't see people dancing it kind of bums us out a little bit but we understand because sometimes, like I said, we still perform the same music at those venues where either a restaurant or the lounge area where it's just sitting down socializing. We still perform the same type of music, but not as aggressive, but our main goal is to have people dancing. That's very important to us because the more people we see dancing the happier that we get and just the more fun we have ourselves on stage knowing that people are liking what they're hearing, which makes us feel good. It makes us feel like we are actually doing what we're supposed to be doing and that's very important to us. Our whole focus is when we get there is be prepared and especially when we see groups of people dancing.

[14:20] This is something that a lot of people don't see much is that when we see them start dancing, instead of stopping the song we'll either extend it or we'll go into another song with a similar rhythm just so they could keep dancing. It's not until we start seeing people walk off the stage, not just because they don't like the music. It's because they're tired. That's when we go, "Okay, it's time to give them a break so let's stop the song," kind of make everybody feel good, make them clap for each other, give them a little break so they could grab a drink, get some water, get rehydrated again. Then we start another song. It might be a different rhythm but the whole goal is to get them back into dancing as much as we can do that throughout the whole night. That's our main goal for every show that we have.

Mary: [15:20] You've already kind of partially answered the next question here so I'm trying to figure out how to reshape it. I'll tell you the question. You can answer. You've answered parts. You can reiterate what you say or add to it or whatever. Tell me about how the audience responds to the music you play while you were playing and what they say to you after the performance.

Roberto: [15:48] After the performance, after we see them dancing and having a good time, we also try to make eye contact with everybody. If we see them smiling, we like to make eye contact, kind of telling them, "Hey, we see you dancing, thank you." At times I even get on the microphone and I point out certain people if a design on a shirt or a design on a dress or something on their outfit, it doesn't matter whether it be male or female, if it

kind of gets my attention and I see them having a good time I'll let the entire audience know, "Hey, isn't that a great shirt," or, "Hey, look at these guys dancing," to kind of give them the feeling that they're also a part of our show. We try to convey that not only are we performing for them, they are performing for us when they dance.

[16:52] Even there's some times when certain songs that we perform, we actually have singalongs with people because they know the words. That, in itself, is something that's very important to us. If they know the words, we tell them, "Hey, come help us out," so they're participating in our show and that's a lot of fun when that happens, when they're participating. Then at the end of the show the people that come up to us, it's a great feeling when they tell us that that's one of the best shows they've ever been to. They say that they've never heard the type of mix up that we have, especially with the instrumentation that we have because, for example, my band Mas Pulpo, there's an accordion, a six-string guitar. I'm sorry, at times there's a guitar but most of the time it's a lap steel, bass and drums.

[17:57] At first glance, especially here in Texas area, their first reaction is like, "Oh, this is Mexican American music, some type of Tex Mex or norteño." Then when we start playing blues and country and a little bit of kind of like just music from Southwest Louisiana like swamp pop, they stop and listen and they're like, "Wow, I've never heard that collaboration before all in one show," and it happens as well with Umbrella Man. They see the instrumentation first and they don't understand what they're going to be paying attention to.

[18:41] Some of the differences, like in Mas Pulpo we'll pay cumbias but we add a punk rock drum beat to it behind it and people freak out because they've never heard a cumbia mixed in with punk rock. With Umbrella Man you have a mix up of the blues and country and Tex Mex and soul and a lot of the Southwest Louisiana so we do a lot of swamp pop with Umbrella Man. Putting all those together, it gets a reaction of people that they're like, "Wow, that instrumentation works well with each other." The main thing they tell us is that they love to dance to everything we play, too, because it's not one single rhythm. They tell us they go see a blues band, they might get tired of listening to the blues because it's going on all night but with us they have the opportunity to listen to blues, listen to country, listen to rock and roll, listen to Tex Mex and listening to cumbias.

[19:43] For them to come to tell us that that's something that they really enjoy or especially the people that are from out of town that are like, "I've never heard anything like it. We've always thought that Tex Mex was just Tex Mex. We didn't know how you could blend it and stuff," so whenever they come to talk to us like that, that gives us a very happy feeling because we know that we can play those genres and of course all of us grew up with those different genres so we're playing our favorite music we like to do but we also feel great that everybody likes the type of music. We're doing it for them. It's always a new form of entertainment that they've never seen before or they never heard the accordion in certain genres and that kind of impresses them. Then they've never heard someone like the punk rock stuff that we add to it. They've never heard it outside of just punk rock. Then they notice it in the cumbias or some of the Tex Mex stuff and they really enjoy that, kind of like the new sound.

[20:46] I actually had a story. Where was I playing at? I was playing with Umbrella Man but after our set a couple came up to me and asked me if I was the same accordion player from the band Mas Pulpo, which is my band. I told them yes and I told them, "You know, we are all from Houston but we do different jobs." This was I guess one of the greatest stories I've ever heard. The couple came up to me, said that it was their first ... I can't remember if they said it was the first time them meeting or it was their first date at my Mas Pulpo show. They said they danced the night away. They fell in love with the music, because it was something different to them. They ended up going out that night, and a couple months later I found them at an Umbrella Man show and they told me they were engaged to get married.

[21:53] That, in itself, that story in itself kind of hit me really hard because I've never really heard how important it was for them to hear that music that night. They said that something that night with Mas Pulpo sparked an interest in them and it was the music that had them dancing together which they found a connection with each other. That was the most, I don't know. It hit me really, really deep because I didn't understand up until that point how important. It doesn't matter that I'm a local musician, my band's a local band. We still don't even have a record out yet but I didn't understand how important it was for people like that to hear the music that we're playing because it gave them a new life that they're going to start together pretty soon.

[22:47] That was very enjoyable for me and I still remember that to this day. I couldn't even remember that they remember me but they said they remember the accordion. They remember the music and of course they didn't understand the Spanish songs but they said they didn't care. They laughed and danced all night and now they're going to be happily married pretty soon so that was exciting for me.

Mary: [23:12] That's a great story. I love that. Tell me about performances or acts you perform with now and also historically.

Roberto: [23:25] Now it's more doors are opening for me now because I'm not the only one. I know I'm not the only one but there's very few accordion players that are willing to push the limit of what the instrument can do. I play the diatonic accordion, which there is a limitation to. I try to stay with one GCF box but there's other boxes, the Fflat, B flat, E flat, the ADG, EAD that are easier to perform in certain keys.

[24:10] I've noticed that a lot of accordion players that I know don't really want to get away from the genre they perform in. If they're a norteño player they don't really want to get into tejano. If they're a tejano player, they don't want to get into norteño. They don't want to play in a blues band. They don't want to play in a country band. They don't really want to go outside of that genre. They just want to stick to what they're grew up with, which is making ... For me, it's a little bit better because I have more job opportunities because more bands that are willing to add the accordion to the sound, there's not that many of us that they can call and if you haven't grown up with those types of genres.

[24:05] I know a lot of people have listened to country music that play accordion but

they never really tried playing the country music on the accordion. It's a bit different because you use certain riffs. You use certain scales. You use certain intervals and, like I said before, when I've tried to do power chords on mine which didn't work. I know that I had to find another route to play. I've never really tried playing heavy metal before but it always interests me and I try to do it, like when I went home, but I don't see anything that's going to work out on there so I had to figure out something else to put there in that area. I see a lot more country bands that call me for hire. I either do a lot of recording sessions with them or I do performances with them, which take me around the country to perform and outside of the country.

[26:07] There's bands that... I'm working with, a band from California called Tremoloco and they perform a variety of country, blues, and rock. They were interested in putting an accordion player in the band but they didn't want the accordion player just to play Tex Mex music. They wanted him to be versatile enough to transfer to those genres and be able to perform with them, which I've done throughout the years and of course I'm still learning. There's a lot to learn from the different genres. I've only pretty much just touched the basics at the moment but having those basics in my repertoire has led me to perform with Los Lobos. They had the same reasoning of why they wanted an accordion player that just doesn't play tejano or norteño. They want somebody that's versatile to play country and blues and rock and roll, which I was able to do so that's why I was able to get hired by them.

[27:19] Being able to play different genres, I've had the opportunity of opening up shows for some of the greatest legends, but from different genres. I've opened up shows for Toots and the Maytal so I don't know how many accordion players can say that, "Hey, I opened up a show for Toots and the Maytal," which is a great legendary ska band. I love them, reggae band and stuff. We played with bands such as Third World. I've worked with people from the likes of Dave Alvin and then the Texas Tornados. I've opened up shows for them. I opened up punk rock shows, so it's been great for me as far as opportunities go that, me being an accordion player and playing an instrument that most people do not see in many genres or they don't even think that it should be in there, it's not until they actually see it being performed with those genres that kind of give them an idea that it can be done but you got to still kind of push the limitations.

[28:35] One of the guys that I've always adored watching Jorge's Mann, and he has made it up to being in the band with Paul Simon on tour. A personal goal of mine is learning, because he's a virtuoso in itself, but I see that he himself studies a lot of different genres and that's what helps him get to where he's at now so that's what I'm kind of doing at the moment is learning as much as I can and still having those doors open for me and going around the country, going around to other countries and showing what I can do with the instrument and showing that there's a possibility of it being added to any band that you can think of. You just have to find out where it works.

Mary: [29:26] I'm thinking more about with the local bands you've performed with, and more currently, but maybe Mas Pulpo and Umbrella Man but describe the venues you play in locally.

Roberto: [29:44] Locally, Mas Pulpo has been a band that's been around I think about a year.

Because I've performed a band such as Skarnales and I still perform with Umbrella Man, and on occasion I still perform with Skarnales as well, but with Mas Pulpo they call us for a lot of festivals is what I've noticed. Most of the shows that I perform throughout the year deal with festivals. The very few shows that I do locally as far as the bar gigs, there's only really two local bars that I go to which is like the D&W Lounge and the Big Top and sometimes The Continental Club. That's where they have Mas Pulpo in when we do perform but the majority of all the shows I've done with Mas Pulpo have been festivals.

[30:40] With Umbrella Man, who I still perform with, we can do small bars. We do larger bars. We've done like large music venues as well. With Umbrella man we have a much more diverse repertoire of music that we have gotten into a lot of weddings. We've done a lot of festivals. We've done theater shows and we go down all the way to local bars whenever we're just wanting to have a good time but with Umbrella Man, I see that band having more chances to be at different types of venues. Mas Pulpo's kind of been my side project where it's my go-to have fun band. It is kind of more of like a punk show. Of course we like dancing music but we want to have a lot of fun so the bar gigs and the festivals work very well with us. I don't see us playing weddings that much just because of the fact that we get too crazy with the music that we're playing with.

[32:03] With Skarnales, I still perform. I do large venues with Los Skarnales, large go-to events. Because of the fact that I'm always busy working with other groups, with them, if there's a big show coming up which is around Texas, I actually go tour with them just to do that show but they're large, large venues. We opened up for Fabulosos Cadillacs in Dallas at The Bomb Factory which held like, I don't know, 1,000 plus people. With them, I do large venues where it's just large capacity of people that come looking for a band. I do a lot of work with Umbrella Man throughout the year, mostly because of the fact that we could get hired by the weddings and the theater venues and then we've also done art shows as well where they call us for art shows. We'll break down just acoustically and be able to perform in art shows. With Umbrella man, that's a band that we have more of a bigger repertoire to kind of do anything and everything with that band.

Mary: [33:20] Describe what the difference would be between playing, with either Mas Pulpo or Umbrella Man, playing at the D&W versus playing at the Big Top or The Continental Club, if there is a difference.

Roberto: [33:40] Yeah, there's a difference. I could actually for both of them because when I perform with Mas Pulpo, when I do The Continental Club or the Big Top, which pretty much they're one in the same, those two venues, you have the younger crowd and older crowd together and they kind of come from all over the place because it's centralized in Midtown in Houston and stuff. You have a much more variety where people are actually, sometimes they'll walk by and hear the music and they want to stop in just to see what it is so at those venues, we kind of get a little bit more rowdy with Mas Pulpo. We do a lot of our punk rhythms and add faster beats to some cumbias and to your traditional polkas that we play here in South Texas. We speed them up like twice as fast and we kind of give it a punk rock edge to it. Our show at Continental and Big Top for Mas Pulpo is more kind of like a punk rock, like in your face, really loud, really fast even

though we're performing traditional Mexican songs.

[35:00] When we perform at the D&W, we might put a little of that taste, maybe a third of our performance but the majority of it is that we change for the public that's there because D&W is more of a neighborhood bar and so you have the same people that go there weekly, and of course you have new people that come in throughout the week but you have the same crowds that are used to listening to a certain type of music and, because it's a large Hispanic based community there, we play all our traditional songs the way they should be played traditionally. We don't speed them up. We try to keep them slow. We keep the cumbias slow.

[35:52] Everything that they're used to, we try to kind of stick to that repertoire because I'm not going to say that they're ... They are open minded because we do play different genres but they want to hear more traditional music at the D&W because that's what a lot of them grew up with and it's their culture. They really want us to respect us playing traditional Mexican songs the way they should be played but in The Continental Club and the Big Top, it's just kind of like a go for it. As long as they're having fun they'll be happy with it.

[36:32] With Umbrella Man we see something similar with Umbrella Man because, like I said, Umbrella Man had such more of a bigger repertoire that we could do a lot of traditional ... We do a lot of roots rock or roots Americana music that works in both Continental, Big Top and the D&W Lounge so a lot of what we do is very traditional. A lot of the original songs that we write are traditional sounding. It doesn't matter wherever we are. That music extends to everybody, no matter whether it's young or old. Everybody likes that type of music because it's familiar to them and it's roots music so everybody has at least heard it at least once in their lives so they're so comfortable with it that they really have no issues with us doing anything we do there.

[37:25] I've had people come up to me at D&W, when we play a traditional American song but we do it in punk rock, we've had people at D&W come up to us, "Why don't you play it traditionally? You know, we can't dance to it," and that's the number one thing. They can't dance to that song the way they're used to it if we add a little punk rock but at The Continental, Big Top area we play the exact same song with the punk rock beat and people that don't know how to dance to the traditional Mexican American song, they'll still be dancing their own way. Their freedom of way of dancing but with the D&W crowd it's more traditional dancing so they want to stay with that traditional style of dancing. They don't want to create their own dance moves at that moment, I guess.

[38:15] I see those differences there between those two areas with those two bands. I have to be real careful whenever I'm at the D&W playing with Mas Pulpo. Make sure that they have some type of traditional sound because, like I said, to them the dancing is very important to them. They want to be able to dance, cumbias and the Tex Mex stuff but the way they know how. They don't want us to speed it up and kind of change the rhythm for them. I see that difference on there but that's pretty much what I'll see with both bands working in both areas.

Mary: [38:49] I think this question has more to do with maybe Mas Pulpo kind of bouncing off of what you were just talking about and plus what I've observed and seeing y'all playing. Could you describe how you may use the Spanish language maybe more in one venue than the other or is it pretty much the same?

Roberto: [39:14] As far as the songs, they're pretty much the same in both venues. I guess when I introduce songs or I introduce the band, depending, for D&W especially, I'm a lot more bilingual in D&W just because there are a lot of older Mexican American families that still go there, some of the couples are still there. They do understand English but they're more comfortable speaking Spanish so I try to be more bilingual and speak English and Spanish there. Even though I still perform some of the same Spanish songs in both venues, I try to be more bilingual whenever I'm addressing the crowd to tell them about the band or a song or what we've been doing while as at Continental and Big Top I mostly stay speaking English when I'm addressing the crowd. The only time I really use Spanish to talk to the crowd at The Continental or Big Top is more when we say jokes or use certain Spanish words jokingly. That's the only time where I use Spanish regularly at the Big Top or Continental Club.

[40:45] We're a little bit, like I said, we're a little bit more rowdy and I don't consider us a political band but our bass player really does not like Trump so he's very verbal about that at our shows, especially at the Big Top and The Continental Club. He's very verbally about that but at the D&W we kind of hold ourselves back just because of the fact that there's a lot of older generation so we try to maintain a little bit more respect even thought with Mas Pulpo we get rowdy no matter where we are. We get loud and rowdy.

Mary: [41:20] We talked a little bit about where we played in the city but what about, has Mas Pulpo or Umbrella Man played in venues outside of the city?

Roberto: [41:40] Yes. Umbrella Man has played a lot more outside the city. We've done venues in Corpus and San Antonio, Austin, Southern Texas, down in Louisiana, gone to California. We've played a lot more with Umbrella Man in outside venues. Mas Pulpo, just because it's only been about a year and a half since we created the group. As far as the musicians in Mas Pulpo, we've all been outside of Houston of course to perform with different bands but the band itself has been mostly just local. We've had the opportunity to play the Fifth Ward Festival, the Navigation Festival that they have, the East End festival. They've hired us for just different events around Houston, different venues around Houston, Under the Volcano. We've done not many private events.

[42:46] -We've done only one wedding. That was just because it was for a personal friend because other people would ask us if we do weddings but we're not really a wedding band as far as Mas Pulpo goes. It's more of kind of like a in your face, happy go lucky fun band so it's not really a wedding band per se. With Umbrella Man, that band has given us a lot of opportunity just because of so many of these genres that we put into it. We've even done weddings out of town. They've hired us for weddings. We've been out to Dallas, played theaters. That band is more likely to be out doing different venues and I'm not sure.

[43:46] Since Mas Pulpo's still so young, we're trying to put our first EP out so I have to

wait and see once we have our EP out that we might start going on tour and traveling outside of Houston but for right now, because we're trying to finalize the first EP, we're sticking around just to be local at the moment until we get something out to actually hand to people to have some type of material so people can hear if we're going out.

[44:08] That's one thing that I've learned is that when you're out of the city, out of your local area, if people like you they want something to remember you by so it could either be a merchandise like tee-shirts or handkerchiefs but most importantly they want to hear the music that they heard when they heard you perform. That's one thing, why I'm keeping Mas Pulpo locally at the moment is because once we get the music out, then I'll start thinking about going out of Houston to perform. Right now I want to just keep it locally till we get it done.

Mary: [44:49] Talked a little bit about going out of town and even out of state with Umbrella Man. Can you describe audience response and feedback outside of Houston? Maybe compare it to Houston?

Roberto: [45:05] Let's see. When we've gone out to Louisiana they really enjoyed it because, like I said, we have some swamp pop music that we perform. Our neighbors in Louisiana, they understand that music and then of course they've heard Tex Mex so they really enjoy it. For them, it's a big dance culture in Louisiana so they really enjoy the type of music we perform.

[45:35] When we go to San Antonio and Austin and especially Corpus, they really enjoy that we do traditional Tex Mex and cumbias because that's what they hear and they get to dance that but at the same time the people that come to see us, especially the older generations, they bring some of their children with them or sometimes it's a family event. They're really, really happy that we play some of the old roots music because sometimes we'll play a Muddy Waters tune or a Bo Diddley tune and so then they haven't heard that music since they were kids but we do it in a traditional roots way that it really impresses them to know that not only are we playing Tex Mex music but we're also doing the roots music, that we'll country music.

[46:32] We'll play Freddy Fender who is, in Texas of course, anywhere around Texas, say Freddy Fender's name and they adore him. They're very, very excited that we get to continue showing other audiences, not only the Texas audience but when we go to California, anywhere in Texas or Louisiana we have a good enough repertoire where it's an example of what you could hear in Texas with Umbrella Man. A lot of people, they tell us that not only is that Houston music, it's Texas music because that's where we really draw our inspiration from is any genre of music that you could find in Texas that has been popular in roots music, we try to put that into Umbrella Man and we take that everywhere we go. That gives a lot of people outside of Houston a glimpse of what we heard here in Houston and surrounding areas.

[47:40] Especially when we go outside of Houston, there's a big response to us playing all those genres at once and they give us a lot of praise for keeping up some of the old roots music and not allowing it to disappear because some of those genres, especially the old polkas, especially when I perform the polkas, the instrumental songs ... Currently

you don't really hear too many tejano or norteño bands with polkas. Probably one or two here and there but back in the early days when this started, that's all you would hear was polkas and redovas, chotisas, huapangos but they had no lyrics and so whenever I perform that type of music in front of people, they always come and tell us, "Wow, that reminded me of my grandparents or my parents and I don't hear that anymore."

[48:45] It is almost like it's disappearing so I'm trying to keep it alive and Umbrella Man is helping me do that since we keep up with roots music. We get a lot of praise from that, from different areas outside of Houston so that's something really exciting that I like. I know people were paying attention to us because of that fact that we're keeping some of the roots music alive for them and that helps it. They really like that.

Mary: [49:12] We talked a little bit about Texas music. Describe how the audience responds and feedback outside of Texas, perhaps in California.

Roberto: [49:29] Yeah. In California, they have Mexican American music as well but it's a slightly different than what we have here in Texas. To them, they really like the Flaco Jiménez and Texas Tornados. They like that sound that they have. Since I've met Lobos and I've performed with them, they do a lot of the era of the very old, kind of like between the '50s and late early '70s style of what we consider ... At the time, there was not really conjunto or norteño. It was just Mexican American music so that's the type of style that they perform and getting to know some of the members of The Blazers. They do the same thing. They perform a lot of the old traditional Mexican American songs that Los Alegres de Terán used to play, Flaco's dad performed, even Flaco himself. It's more that old traditional way of playing. They still do some of the polkas.

[50:49] What I've noticed is that the guys in California that kind of are infusing the Mexican American with the rock and the country, they're focusing on the old Mexican American songs so when they hear some new stuff coming across like a huapango, a norteño huapango, there is a big influence of Veracruz music but then like with something jarocho. The style of huapango that they know is not the same one as norteño huapango that we know here in Texas so whenever they hear that they're like, "That's not the huapango I know," but that's where the differences kind of get you but when they hear it they're like, "I like it." It just sounds totally different from what they're used to hearing but they really enjoy listening to traditional Tex Mex music.

[51:47] The guys that I've seen performing in California, they try to play as close to it as possible but I don't know if it's maybe like the Chicano LA rock, like era back then where ... They have their own way of playing over there which is great because they play some of the traditional Mexican American songs completely different than what I hear here in Texas but it's pretty unique. I like the way their style is and the people that have heard me perform, they're like, "Wow, man. That's Texas music. That's how Texas is supposed to sound." I guess it's just because of the areas we live in. They live in such a different location but they still have Mexican music.

[52:36] Then a lot of the groups over there, too, that have accordion. You have the Sinaloense type of music and the grupera and the banda music which, over here, it's

just starting come around in Texas but we weren't really used to that but in California they are. You have the different people playing the different types of accordion performances but they really enjoy the Tex Mex sound a lot. A lot of people tell me that once they hear a song from Texas Tornadoes they automatically know it's Texas Tornadoes just because of that Texas sound that was brought by Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers and Flaco and Freddy. You know it's them and even if somebody actually plays a song from them and does a cover of them, once you hear that sound you can tell that's a Texas sound.

[53:35] There's something intriguing about them. I guess they tell me the way I perform accordion, it's really Texas based and I guess it's because I've grown up here so long and grew up with the Texas accordion players that the California accordion players, they just have a different way of performing but I really like their performance, as well. It gives me another look of how to play the instrument itself and another way of looking at it kind of through somebody else's eyes and through somebody else's ears. They really enjoy the sound out there, especially because we have such a unique sound here in Texas with Tex Mex music. There's a certain style to it.

[54:24] I don't think it's the same as far as like in South Texas. The people that are born and raised there that know the polkas, they call it the taquachito style of dancing. You're dancing with a slow polka rhythm while you drag your feet and so I don't know if that's probably only here in Texas but I don't think they have that same style of dancing in California but that's what kind of created the sound that Texas has is the taquachito, the way they dance, because it's so hot down here. They drag their feet while they're dancing a polka and you notice the dancing in California. It's almost the same but not quite. You still don't have that dragging of the feet and that style that you see down south in Texas, like San Antonio and the valley there. I think that has a big importance, too, how we perform the accordion for people.

Mary: [55:24] How does your band get gigs?

Roberto: [55:33] The majority of the gigs that we get are by word of mouth. About 90% of every gig we had for Mas Pulpo has been through word of mouth by somebody knowing of who we are or other bands that we've been in and they just call us and see what band is available. The other 10% have been from cards that we give out. Somebody sees us perform and they'll ask us if we have a business card.

[56:12] The majority of those gigs, that's another thing. With Mas Pulpo we have the opportunity to break down the band from a full band to maybe a two-piece or three-piece and they ask us can we play traditional? Can we just keep it to a duet? That helps us a lot with gigs. We do a lot of those gigs as well and those are mostly based through they see us. They like that we play traditional music so they'll call us for a house party or a gathering at a restaurant and then they hire us to play at the table. The rest of the time, those are like the big festival gigs and certain people, owners of venues that know us. They'll call us and ask us if we have available dates. It's mostly by word of mouth, that I've noticed that Mas Pulpo gets gigs is through word of mouth.

[57:17] Same thing with Umbrella Man. There's certain gigs where we do yearly. Nick

has been able to kind of work that out every year to where there's a date that's always set for us and the rest of the time it's the same thing. People have heard us throughout the years of us being the band in Houston that is always available. That's the other big thing is that the people who call us know that we're available because the majority of the musicians here in Houston that I know of personally still have day jobs. They call us a lot for the City of Houston because a lot of their events are in the morning during the week so there's no other band available so they'll call Umbrella Man or Mas Pulpo to do it and we're available because we do this for a living, which gives us another opportunity kind of away from everybody else.

[58:17] That helps us out but most of the time they're always calling us through word of mouth because it's rare. We do give out business card but we ask people how they heard about us. They heard us through a friend at our show or somebody saw us at a show and recommended us or the venues call each other and be like, "Who's available? Who can play at certain times and genres of music?" And that's all. That's how we get our gigs.

Mary: [58:41] Tell me about how or whether individuals and fans of different bands might network with each other to play together or get gigs for each other or ...

Roberto: [58:54] Yeah. The Houston community scene, the musicians, we're very helpful with each other because whenever someone can't do an event, we try to recommend our friends that we know. For example, there's been times where there might be a country gig available where Umbrella Man or Mas Pulpo can't do it. We have friends in the country genre that, like the Broken Spokes, and we'll call them, be like, "Hey, man. Are y'all guys available for this country gig?" We ourselves try to help out other musicians as well, whenever I can do. I actually had a friend of mine, Ruben Moreno, he was called to do a recording session for someone but he wasn't available so he sent my number to them and they called me.

[59:58] We're always looking out for each other. If we can't do it, if we know we're not going to be available we try to get somebody we know that is capable of doing the job. We try to pass it onto them or if somebody calls us like a promoter and they ask, "Who do you recommend?" Depending on the genre of music, they want who's best for it. We have a lot of friends in the different genres that are just strictly rock and roll or just strictly country or just blues or blues rock so we have those contacts with all of us so we pretty much try to help out as many people as we can.

[1:00:41] Even some people even hire us if they have a job to do and they don't have a band, they'll call a group of musician friends they know and make a group. I've done that with my friend Vladimir where they want a traditional norteño band but our drummer's not a traditional norteño drummer so I just let him know, "Hey, man. We have to do this gig. It's not a regular Mas Pulpo gig. We're going to have to create a whole new band so we're going to get bajo sexto and a traditional norteño or conjunto drummer," so we just call up the friends that we know, make a group and give them jobs. Pretty much everybody in the community, we try to keep everybody working at some point at one another. It's very helpful, though, because you just and ever know. You might get that call.

[1:01:37] I believe Nick, somebody had his number at a recording studio and Billy Joe Shaver came asking for a bass player and they gave him Nick's number. That was very, very helpful for Nick and a great opportunity and same thing with me. When I met Tremoloco, I didn't even know who they were. They came into Texas and they had called I believe a music critic here and asked them who was a good accordion player that will fit our band and my name was brought up so they sent my name to them and I got a call. People are looking out for each other, whether you know it or not, but we're looking out for each other. We're making sure if there's a job opportunity that you can't do, pass it on to the next guy because it always comes back to you.

[1:02:36] We always try to help each other out in that way. It's been continuing. We've been doing that for years. As long as I've been playing in the Houston music scene, we've all done that to one another at one point or any time in the close to 20 years I've been doing the music scene. We've all helped each other out at least once. Been pretty close to that so we all helped out each other at least once.

Mary: [1:03:12] I'm just thinking about a time that I went to go see you guys play at the D&W and one of y'all's friends was a mariachi player.

Roberto: [1:03:15] Oh yes.

Mary: [1:03:16] I believe he's a trumpet player.

Roberto: [1:03:17] He's a trumpet player. We call him huero because he's so dark. It's just a name that stuck with him but his name is Jesus Romero and I met him through the music scene. He plays in mariachi groups. He has his own band called Los Guerreros de la Musica. He's performed with us at a number of occasions. The reason why he kind of gets up with us and we help him, he helps us, we help him. It's the same thing, just like it's an instrument you don't know many people play or that are so versatile with it because not only does he do mariachi, he could follow you along with the blues. He could follow you in country. He could follow you in rock and even some of the swamp pop. He's versatile enough to where we could put him wherever we need him and he'll perform. I believe he also plays guitar. Not too much but I know he plays guitar. He writes songs.

[1:04:29] He's called me a couple times and we've done a duo at private events or he's asked me to help him. I've actually played with his mariachi band because his mariachi band doesn't have an accordion but somebody had requested them to have an accordion player so he'll call me up and he'll give me a job with them. Yeah, we help each other out and sometimes, without us knowing, they pop up and if they got their instrument we're like, "Come on. Let's play and jam." It not only helps us. It gives the audience just another way of them to have fun but, at the same time, they get to meet who he is and a lot of people ask me who he is so I just tell them. If you need a mariachi player, call him. He's got a mariachi group. He has his own group together. He could fit in wherever you need him to.

[1:02:26] That's another way of us helping each other that way. He uses my name by

telling everybody, "Oh, I performed with him. He's really good," and then I do the same thing or I've done the same thing with him. "He's really good. You need to call him up for this. If you need a trumpet player that could do this," that's the kind of call so we're always trying to help each other out in that form.

Mary: [1:05:49] How has your experience performing music changed over time?

Roberto: [1:05:53] In the beginning, it was always about I guess trying to show off at one point just to show people that I could perform. When I started actually performing it was very fun because it was something new and you didn't know what to expect. You didn't know how the crowd was going to react to you, how you were going to do. How were you going to work with other bands. Once I got through that stage in life to where I got comfortable enough to where, even though I didn't know the band, I could still follow along with them and make friends with them.

[1:06:39] Having been performing in front of different groups of people, I kind of more or less, now I've learned how to read the audience a bit to see if they're interested or they're not interested. If something doesn't work, we change it and then if that works we stick to it. That, in itself, has changed throughout the years. At one point it started feeling like a job, which was not good because I was getting a little bit bored. Then I realized, I'm like, "Man, I get to do this every week," and not many people get to do that. Traveling was a big experience for me so now I kind of sit back and look at it. I'm like, "Man, it's still fun." When I was getting overwhelmed by having so much work, I didn't really notice how much fun I was actually having because you're still learning. I still haven't finished learning.

[1:07:44] Working with all these new bands and having the opportunity to go record with different bands and to perform with them, I still have homework that I have to go do back at home. I don't practice as much as I used to but I still see myself practicing for a couple hours a day to continue to improve the music that I have and it's always about that is to constantly improve the performance. That's the main thing. Before it was constantly trying to improve myself, to learn the instrument and now that I've been playing it for over 17 years, I still want to improve playing the instrument but my main goal is to try to improve the group, any group that I'm with, to improve the performance for the people because that's the most important thing for us. When you have a great performance in music, the people see that. All the hard work, all the practice that we put into it, it all comes down to performance of the whole band in its entirety.

[1:08:55] Of course, on our own, we practice the music at home. When we get to rehearsals we make sure that everything fits almost like a puzzle. That's pretty much the only thing that's changed is that now I'm more focused to making the music better, trying to write songs that will get to people's emotions, to get them to react somehow. As far as everything else, the touring's the same. Every time we go in front of people, it's always a new experience because even though you performed in front of so many people, it's always that new experience like, "Oh man, what if they've seen the show before but we can do it better this time? They're going to probably be more excited for us," so that's what the music for me that has changed the most. Now I just want the people to appreciate it and to enjoy it because we're putting so much work and

ourselves into the music that that's the only thing that has changed for me is that now all my focus is just shifted to them.

[1:10:10] Of course make music that makes me happy as an artist but it all comes down to getting the fans' reaction because that's what our biggest goal is to have the fan's reaction, whether it be good or bad. It gives us what we need in order to go back and fix whatever we need to fix. It's always a constant getting better, getting a performance better and getting the audience to just love it more and more and more so they could keep asking for it. That's the biggest difference in music for me is that I've changed to view that as the music that's important to us.

Mary: [1:10:49] What would you say about performing with your act or performing with musicians that we haven't already covered in this interview?

Roberto: [1:11:03] I'm always waiting for the door to be open to see if I could perform with someone I haven't performed with. Some of our friends, we've performed along one another in different groups but now I still have that kind of like want to see ... I have a friend of mine that moved from Austin to Oregon and I kind of miss the ska reggae sound. Every time he comes into town I get to perform one song with him but I still feel that I want to try that. I want to try a group where it's strictly ska reggae because I kind of miss playing that. It's weird. With the groups we have now, we have to play so many different genres of music, I kind of miss having just to play one genre.

[1:12:13] It's one of those things where I used to get bored when I used to have to play one genre but now that I have to play so many types of genres, I'm like, "I just want to get back to just one and just focus on that." It's really difficult because of all the doors that have been opened but there's local norteño bands and tejano bands that have asked me if I wanted to join, or not even that but bands that are not even around, that are not even created yet. They have asked, "What if we make a group of just this type of music." That's tempting but it's just more work on my plate that I would have to try to ... It's bad enough that I'm already working with three different bands and then working on recording sessions with others but I still think about that.

[1:13:09] I'm like, "Man, that would be nice to just get back to one style of music and do that for a while," because you see some of your friends that are performing that type of music. You're like, "Man, I wish I could just do that," and take a break from everything else and just focus on what's happening here, now. It gets a lot harder because we're just working so much. I still, I don't know. Maybe one day I'll probably do that with some friends because we've talked about it, just making a garage band and just keeping it local, not having a tour, just local band that plays local music and see how that feels like for a while. I'll still have that kind of at the back burner and see if that'll work at one point or another. Yeah, I would like to do some stuff like that to work with certain bands that are just doing one type of genre and not moving around so much.

Mary: [1:14:04] Is there anything else you would like to add, maybe something I've forgotten to ask ... or should've asked?

Roberto: [1:14:14] I think we pretty much covered everything. I can't think of anything right now.

No. I think that's about it.

Mary: [1:14:25] All right. Cool. Thank you very, very much for your time today ...

Roberto: [1:14:30] No problem.

Mary: [1:14:30] ... and for sharing your knowledge and your experience and your stories and for entertaining me. This concludes the interview with Roberto Rodriguez.

Roberto: [1:14:41] All right.