

Interviewee: Isaac 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: [00:00] Turn it on, and make sure the numbers are moving, and they are. Then I'm going to say, today is April 2nd, 2017. I'm Mary Manning at the University of Houston. I'm working on a research project called Community Practice Identity Building and the Gulf Coast Sound. I am at Bohemio's with Isaac Rodriguez, who is a DJ and also a bass player?

Isaac: [00:27] Yeah.

Mary: [00:29] You have kindly agreed to share your knowledge and experience about DJing, so let's ask the first question. Describe your first memory of hearing music.

Isaac: [00:43] All right. That's a good question. I'm about to be 38, so I was born in '79. My first memories of music were pretty much the first lineup of the MTV videos, you know what I mean, from like '82, '83. All those videos, every time I hear one of those songs, it takes me ... I was probably three or four years old, maybe four years old then. Those first class of videos, that's one of my first memory of music, just all the songs they would play back then.

[1:18] Those videos, those were my first memories of music. It's like the Beat It video and the Video Killed the Radio Star, all those I can remember being a kid and watching them and just sitting in front of MTV and just watching it. You know what I mean? I had an older brother and sister, and I guess when MTV came out it was a big deal. 120 Minutes, the show on MTV, all those were my introduction into music. It wasn't the radio. It wasn't me hearing family members play acoustic guitar or anything. It was pretty much MTV. That's what it was.

Mary: [2:00] Do you remember any other groups that you heard while you were listening?

Isaac: [2:05] It was just basically whatever they were playing at that time. It was Beat It. I'm probably forgetting because I'm getting interviewed, but every time I hear these songs, Duran Duran, The Cure, what else was it, David Bowie, all that, that first class of MTV videos was pretty much it. Every time I hear it, it takes me back to being a kid.

[2:32] I was probably four years. I got to guess. I got to see what exact year that was when it came out, but it was probably like, you know, I remember the commercials saying, "Broadcasting MTV for the first time." It was like a shuttle taking off, and that was my first introduction to music really.

Mary: [2:56] Describe how the music was part of your family or community.

Isaac: [3:01] Okay. Music that was part of my family was my dad was in a band. I didn't grow up with my dad, but I would always hear stories about my dad being in a band. He played in a garage band. That's how my mother and father met. My mother's older brother was in a garage band, and they were practicing at my mom's parent's house in Fifth Ward. My dad, he told me this story, he said, "We were jamming out in the garage, and some little girl walks in the garage. And she's looking all flirty, and she doesn't want to leave, and her brother's trying to kick her out." That was my mom. My dad's like three years older than my mom or something.

[3:49] I would always hear stories. My uncle passed away too. My uncle passed away in the 80s, so I would always hear stories of my uncle and my dad jamming together, but more so my uncle because I think my dad just jammed as a garage band. He never moved forward with it. My uncle, he was a musician. He had a job, but musician was also another source of income. He played drums for Archie Bell. It was probably like one-offs here and there, but he was more serious about it. That's always been the story in my family.

[4:23] Also, Archie Bell has been a big part of my family. Because ever since I can remember, when the family would get together and my aunts and uncles would get together, it wasn't nothing else but Archie Bell that would come on. Archie Bell was the first thing that they would play. Because they're from the Fifth Ward, so they would all tell stories about Archie. They would all do the Tighten Up. That's been a huge, huge part of my family's musical story. Then once they started playing Archie, they would start talking about my uncle, who that was like the highlight of his career playing drums for Archie Bell. I could imagine that was fun back, it was probably in the 70s that he did that. That's pretty much where it goes with my family.

[5:18] My dad played in a garage band with my uncle, and my older brothers and sisters, they were all huge fans of music. They introduced me to music. I said the MTV thing, but once I got around to actually getting old enough to hear music and like it by my own judgment, first music I was introduced to was punk. I didn't have a chance. My brother was punk, my sister was punk. It wasn't the radio. He listened to hiphop too. I got dragged to my first show when I was like 11 years old.

[6:05] I'm 37, about to be 38 this month, and people talk about the old Axiom days and stuff like that, and I'm like, I would've missed that because I was young. I was 12, 11 years old, but luckily I had an older brother. They took me there. Whenever these people that are 10 years older than me talk about it, they get surprised like, "What do you know? You didn't go, you know. You were too young," but really I did go. I seen Sprawl play there plenty of times. They were like my first favorite band, Sprawl, in the

early 90s when I was like 12 or 13. I seen them play there. I seen a play they did called Jesus Christ Superstar.

[6:46] I went to the Vatican. I seen so many shows there, and I was probably, seriously, the youngest kid there because of my older brother and sister. They would both drag me. They would take me with them. I remember the first show they took me to I was just playing outside in the front yard, and I was probably 11 years old, maybe 12. My brothers and sisters were leaving, and I was like, "Where y'all going?" They were like, "You want to come?" I was like, "Yeah." They were like, "Go ask mom." My mom was like, "Yeah, go ahead, take him," so they took me to shows. That was it. I was 11, 12 years old.

[7:17] They would take care of me of course. My brothers and sisters, a lot of people would go and drink and smoke or do whatever and hang out, they went specifically for the music. As soon as the band start, we would all be dancing and stuff like that, but everybody would take care of me because I was the youngest kid. Even people I didn't know, if people were dancing too crazy in front of me, they would grab me and pull me over to the side. That's what I remember the most. My family had a big influence on where I'm at now, playing music and DJing. I think that's about it that I can say about my family.

Mary: [7:55] What about places outside of bars? Did you do any music in school, or were there any ...

Isaac: [8:08] I never did music in school. I was always just a fan of music. Even when I started playing in a band, it wasn't supposed to happen. I was never a bass player. Pretty much when I joined the band, they gave me a bass, so we all had to learn together. There was never no one else in my family who did music. I never touched any instruments. I never sang or anything like that. It was just I was always just a fan of music. There was nobody else in my family who was a musician beside my uncle, who passed away when I was very young, and my dad, who wasn't really a part of my life until later on. We were all just fans of music. That's it.

Mary: [8:52] When did you start playing music?

Isaac: [8:55] I actually started playing music kind of late. I started playing music in my mid-20s. Most people pick up a guitar or their instrument when they're a teenager. Me, I didn't pick it up till I was in my mid-20s. I had a friend, he was starting up a band. He's one of those guys where, "I'm getting a band going." Really, he didn't have a band. It was his dream to start up a band. He was just getting into music, and I could tell he was thirsty for knowledge of music. This was before, I mean, it wasn't before the internet, but the internet, it wasn't as common to go to Google and just google something. It's like the late 90s, early 2000s.

[9:37] Me knowing more or less what he was trying to go as far as his music, I start turning him on to bands and giving him CDs and tapes. One day he got a job at a Guitar Center or something like that, and he came over my house one day after work with a bass and a bass amp. He was like, "Here." I was like, "What you talking about?"

What's this?" He was like, "This is for you." He's like, "Learn how to play it so you can jam with me." I was like, "Oh, really?" He's like, "Yeah." I took it to my room, and it took me a while just to know how to pluck it, learn how to pluck it and hold it and stuff.

[10:11] After a few months we started actually sounding kind of like a band. Then about a year or two, we got to the point to where we made music and it didn't suck. I guess it did, but people were surprised that we taught ourselves, and it was groovy or whatever. They could dance to it. Because the music we started playing was more like ska and punk. Everyone's like, "Wow, you guys are actually, you know, you taught yourselves." With that we went and played our first show, and I guess the rest is history. I played in those bands. I played music in bands for, it didn't last long, like 10 years.

[10:57] Then a few years ago I just quit all the bands I was in and just started focusing on my family and DJing because it was getting kind of hectic with my job, my band, my family, and with DJing. I had to cut one off, and I think the easiest one to cut off was being in a band. It's kind of like being in a whole nother relationship with three different personalities, five different personalities. As much as I loved it, it was just a easier way out as far as just, you know, the easiest one to let go. Because DJing, I could do that by myself. I have my family and my job, which I can't let go.

[11:41] About three years ago, yeah, I played my last show with this band that I was in called FUSKA. We made some noise, and they're still together. We made noise. We got interest from Smelvis Records from LA, the guy who plays guitar for Tim Armstrong's band, not Rancid. He's got another band, but he plays guitar for them, and he's got his own record label. He kept hitting me up trying to get us to send him more music and stuff. Because he came to Houston and played with us.

[12:17] We did everything I set out to. When I started up a band, we started it up to have fun and just play the shows that we wanted to go to that now we don't have to pay to get in them. We played the 30FootFALL Christmas show, and we toured and all that. That's all I wanted to get out of it, and I felt like I did. That was it with that.

Mary: [12:44] Could you give me a timeline of the first bands you played for?

Isaac: [12:49] The first band I played in was called Always Guilty. I played in that band from like 2000 to 2007, but the whole time wasn't playing shows actually. 2000 is when he gave me the bass, and I had to learn how to play it. That took a year or two before we actually stepped out of the garage and played our first show. I'd say from 2000 to 2007 it was Always Guilty. Then 2007 to 2013, I started up this band called FUSKA.

[13:27] With FUSKA I did everything. We did everything really fast. We put out albums. We toured. We had a really good fan base right off the bat because people knew me from Always Guilty, and also the other guys that I had recruited to be in the band with me, they were in pretty well-known bands around the city. That was the best part. I learned everything with Always Guilty. You learn how to play shows and negotiate and what and what not to do.

[14:02] Then with FUSKA, I took everything I learned from Always Guilty and did FUSKA the right way. Then from 2013 to 2014, I left FUSKA in 2013, and then I joined the Skatastrophics in 2014. I only stayed in the Skatastrophics for about a year. The Skatastrophics were started up by the guy who I first started playing with in Always Guilty, so that's why I joined that band. Because he seen that I wasn't in FUSKA no more, so he was like, "Man, come, let's jam again. You know, it's been a long time, and we started off together." I started jamming with them.

[14:37] I left FUSKA because I didn't have enough time, and I kind of got talked into jamming in the Skatastrophics, which I enjoyed and I wanted to. I realized while I was in the Skatastrophics that it wasn't going to work out, so I left them too, and that was it. That was like three years ago as far as me being in a band and playing music.

Mary: [15:01] Can you tell me more about learning to play your instrument and what influenced you, your style, and how you learned?

Isaac: [15:12] Honestly, I mean, I was in the room. I'm self-taught all the way. I never sat down with anyone and they showed me like, all right, this is A, B, D or whatever. I just learned how to play by myself. I asked questions to people who I knew played bass, how would you hold it; how do you pluck it; what fingers are best to use. I just started playing by ear. If something sound right, it sounds right.

[15:46] This guy who was a really good guitar player joined Always Guilty, and then he told me, "Yeah, you're doing a good job, you know. Just, you taught yourself, you know, and that's great, and what you're doing is right." He showed me the scales and everything like that. I was playing scales, I just didn't know I was playing them. He's like, "Yeah, you're playing a minor scale. That's a minor scale. That's a major scale." He is the one who told me. I was doing it already. I was doing the job, but he told me what I was doing. That's how I learned how to play the bass.

Mary: [16:22] That's cool.

Isaac: [16:24] Yeah.

Mary: [16:25] I want to go back to when you were talking about your friend who bought the bass for you, and before that you shared-

Isaac: [16:37] He didn't buy it.

Mary: [16:40] Oh, he didn't.

Isaac: He didn't buy it. He took it from his job.

Mary: Oh, okay. I thought, wow, that was generous.

Isaac: [16:46] No. That's funny, because he took it, and a week later he had to come get it back.

Mary: He borrowed.

Isaac: [16:50] Yeah. He bought me one after that, so yeah, I guess he is generous.

Mary: [16:55] One thing that interested me that you said was that when you met him, he was interested in music. You already knew about music because you were listening to music, and you shared the music with him. Can you talk to me about, because that seems kind of relevant to DJing in a way, this idea of listening and being a fan and playing and sharing?

Isaac: [17:22] Yeah. He's like three years younger than me. Not everyone was lucky enough to have a older brother and sister that took them to shows, you know what I mean? I learned a lot at a young age. I seen bands like Bad Brains, which were one of his influences. I start telling him, "Hey, check out H.R.'s got solo stuff, you know. He started his own band back in the day." He didn't really know about that kind of stuff. He just might've heard of Bad Brains, but he didn't know that H.R. had his totally own band. They have good music. I had the music, and I was like, "Here, check it out."

[18:03] Like I said, he was doing the ska/reggae thing, so I turned him on to a bunch of other bands that he had never heard of. Because I think like UB40 was his influence, but I start telling him about Lee "Scratch" Perry and the Skatalites and about Studio One record Label and everything. I just start teaching him everything that I had learned from going to shows and from being around older people that taught me, you know what I mean?

[18:31] Like I say, this guy was from the suburbs. He just heard music, might have seen a video on MTV or heard a song on the radio that he was like, oh, that's cool, but he wasn't really aware of everything. He didn't know the history or the culture of the music that he was trying to play, and he didn't know really much about it besides what he had heard on the radio or seen on MTV. Then I start telling him the history of the music, like the history of Jamaican, like ska, yeah, you hear of ska punk, but it's really ska is Jamaican. It was from Jamaica. I start telling him about that and stuff, and he started getting more into the Jamaican stuff.

[19:12] It is kind of like DJing. That's another reason why I started DJing because I was always turning people on to stuff that they had never heard of before. That's pretty much how it went with that. I pretty much told him how it was with Jamaican ska, but by the time I finished with him, he knew everything, what was Jamaican ska, what was Two Tone from the UK, what you could hear, what's from the US. He knew all that by the time we had started up the band.

[19:43] We helped each other out. I taught him about music, and he was like my support system as far as playing the bass and someone saying, "Man, you suck."  
[19:54] Because he would be like, "Nah, dude, it's good, man. You're sounding cool, you know. Don't worry about it. You're learning and it's cool." I guess we kind of helped each other out."

Mary: [20:02] You mentioned learning from your brothers and sisters and going to shows and MTV, but were there any other ways you were discovering music?

Isaac: [20:14] That was pretty much it. I would just have to be home and go to my brother's room, and he would get a new cassette or something. Obviously he was older than me. He's eight years older than me, so the weekends when I wasn't going to shows with him or when he wasn't going to shows, I'd be home just playing his cassettes. I think the first cassette I knew front to back was Agnostic Front, Victim in Pain. I was young as heck, and I knew that cassette front to back. It's kind of funny. This is like I didn't have to go anywhere outside my house for music.

[20:50] My sister was a huge fan of new wave and The Smiths and stuff. Obviously I'm a huge Smiths fan, and I got that from her. Most Chicanos are really into The Smiths. A lot of people don't realize it, but there's guys that are like all cholos, and they love The Smiths. They have Morrissey tattoos on them and stuff like that. Really, that's like a whole nother story.

Mary: [21:17] That's a really interesting story.

Isaac: [21:18] There's videos about it. East LA and The Smiths, they go hand in hand. They show these cholos with tattoos. I know a cholo with a Smiths tattoo on him, and he's got a Joy Division tattoo on him, Love Will Tear Us Apart Again. He's like straight up, if you seen him in his low rider car, you would not assume that that's what he was listening to. I think it's just kind of weird.

Mary: [21:44] Do you have any idea why that might be?

Isaac: [21:47] I don't know. I think it's because we're like real passionate people, and The Smiths' music is about heartbreak. I don't know. It's just real heavy. The band Girl in a Coma, they're Chicanas from San Antonio, and they're influenced by The Smiths one hundred percent. If you talk to them, they give all props to Morrissey and The Smiths. They named their band after one of the songs. It's just, I don't know. That's how it always been, but yeah, you can google that, like why do Mexicans love The Smiths or Mexicans love Morrissey, and there's a bunch of videos that come up about it.

[22:29] It's just singing about love, and Mexicans, we're all about our relationships with our women and vice versa. I don't know, but it's just also that band right there has been a heavy influence on my family and bonding moments. We'd jam to The Smiths. It's just something, I don't know. It's always been natural to us, you know what I mean. People wouldn't expect it, but to us, it's just been something that we did. We'd jam to The Smiths. A lot of people don't think that Chicanos are really into Smiths, but we are.

Mary: [23:11] When did you start DJing?

Isaac: [23:17] I actually haven't been doing it ... I've been DJing probably 10 years. I guess I'm still a rookie compared to a lot of the guys I know. I started DJing, I'd say, maybe sooner; I'd say 2006, so a little over 10 years I started DJing. The reason why was

because my band had just started playing shows. We would start playing at venues, and I would notice we were a ska band or ska punk band or whatever. Usually when you go play at a venue, it's just up to the sound guy to throw on whatever he wants to throw on. If he's into metal, he's going to throw on metal. If he's into grunge, he's going to throw on grunge or whatever.

[24:02] The people would start coming to the shows, and they'd be like, "Man, you know, like ... " I can listen to anything. It doesn't affect me. I'm not one of those people who's going to be like, "Man, what's going on with this; what's this playing?" Say the DJ would play a certain genre of music, and the people, I could tell that they wanted to get warmed up for the show. The music that the DJ was playing didn't necessarily go with what we were playing, and I knew that's what would get these people warmed up and ready for us to come on.

[24:38] I started making mix CDs and bringing them to the shows of ska and punk and ska punk. I noticed every time I'd put the CD on before we played and every time a song would come on like, say, One Step Beyond from Madness, people would start reacting and dancing and stuff like that. I was like, wow, if I play that at a certain time of night, I'm sure it could get these guys going. From CDs I went on to bringing my ... I got to rewind a little bit. Is that cool?

Mary: [25:15] Yeah.

Isaac: [25:22] We're good? Okay. I started bringing my turntables to the shows, and I was like, "Man, you know what? I'm not going to bring a mix CD no more. I'm going to bring my turntables, and I'm going to DJ. I'm going to play my records that I want these people to ... that I think these people should hear." Not only could I play them and turn them on to the music, but I could play it at the right time. Say people start getting there early and a good song comes on, they're not going to react to it as they would if I played it after they had a buzz, you know what I mean? If I played it early, they might bob their head to it or something, but if I play it later on in the night, then I can really get them going.

[26:03] If I can rewind, the reason why I had my turntables is because in the late 90s, I mean, I've always been into punk and everything, but I'm from Houston, so I couldn't help but being into like screw music. Buying screw tapes, you get influenced by DJ Screw. You go out and you buy you some turntables, and you just learn how to do all the stuff he was doing. I had these turntables, but I never had ever thought of DJing with them. I just wanted to make mix tapes and stuff like that, which I never got around to doing it. I just bought the turntables, and I taught myself how to DJ, how to scratch and how to chop and everything, but I never got into making mix tapes or DJing.

[26:44] Actually, when I started playing bass, that's when I put the turntables away and just start focusing on making music. Then once I started playing in a band and started bringing those mix CDs to the shows, then realizing that I could just bring my own turntables and DJ my own shows during intermission or before or even after.



Sometimes when we were finished playing, people wouldn't want to leave, so that would be perfect time for me to DJ some more tunes.

[27:13] That's what got me into DJing, just basically wanting to just make my shows better and just DJ during intermission and making sure the right music was played at my shows that I wanted people to hear and that I pretty much knew that they wanted to hear. That's what it was.

Mary: [27:34] How has the style of music that you DJed changed over time, or has it?

Isaac: [27:39] Yeah, it actually has. It's changed big time actually. When I first started DJing, like I said, I was playing all Jamaican stuff, ska and reggae and stuff from the UK and punk. That's what I was playing most of the time. Probably the first seven years of me DJing I was focusing on all that, ska and punk and reggae. That's what it was all about. It wasn't until my grandma, she lives in LA. She lives in LA, and she comes to visit once maybe every five years. She's lived there my whole life. She's never lived in Houston for my whole life. She comes this last time three years ago, and every time she comes I pick her up and take her out to eat.

[28:24] This last time she came three years ago, probably four now, she comes and stays with her sister. Her sister lives over here on the South Side. I go to pick her up, and I notice her sister's having an estate sale the next day. They're getting ready to have an estate sale. I go in there to pick her up. I give her a hug and say hi. She's like, "Hey, your tia's having an estate sale. If you see anything you want, just take it." I was like, "Cool." I was like, "Do you have any records by any chance?" My aunt was like, "Yeah, I have a box over there. If you want them, take them."

[29:02] I pull out the box, and I notice it's a bunch of 45s of Texas stuff like Sunny & The Sunliners, Little Joe & the Latinaires. It's pretty much all the early Tex-Mex, the early Tejano stuff, but it was their English stuff because most of the Tejano guys, most of the Tejano bands, they all started off playing R&B and soul before they did Tejano. They all started off playing English. Basically I hit the jackpot without even knowing it. I took that box home, and I cleaned up the records because they were all in really bad condition because they had been sitting for years.

[29:40] I took them home. I threw them on, and as soon as I threw them on, I automatically felt a connection with it. I automatically knew that I had been missing out and automatically knew that I had been neglecting my own culture. I had been not supporting the music. At the same time this is what my mom and my dad and my grandparents listened to. I had been totally focused on something else that by the time I got these records, honestly, I think it was meant to be. I think someone told me like, "Whoa, Isaac, like what are you doing? Like, you need to help us preserve this music."

[30:20] Because in Houston, a lot of the bands I spin are from Houston. They did so much work in the 60s, and nobody knows about them. That kind of stuff got swept under the rug. Basically I'd inherited my aunt's collection of Tex-Mex 45s, and 90% of it was bands from Houston that I had heard the names. I'd hear my grandparents

talking about these bands that they would go see and my mom and dad talking about that they'd go see, but I never stopped. I was too busy trying to be a kid and explore music. Sometimes you don't really focus on what's in the house, what are they listening to. You hear them talk about the bands, and I would love to hear the stories, but it never hit me to start researching these bands that they were talking about until I got that record collection.

[31:12] Once I got that record collection from my aunt, if I was going left, I made a right turn. I'd say that was like three years ago, almost four, and that's pretty much the direction I've been going in ever since. I slowly started playing less ska when I would DJ and less of what I was doing before, and I'd start throwing this more into the mix until it got to the point to where this Tex-Mex stuff is all I did. It's all I'm passionate about right now, and that's what I'm doing.

[31:47] For me it's kind of weird because I built up a crowd with what I was doing before. Now that I got into this Tex-Mex stuff, I'm starting all over. If I did the ska, I could DJ to a full house. People know me. They'll come out, and that's what they want to hear. That's what they know me as, but I had to start all over when I got into Tex-Mex. Because the average person, if you're into ska or punk, you're not going to be into Tex-Mex. That's just what I've learned throughout the years. People want to hear what they want to hear. They want to go out. They want to hear punk. They want to hear ska. They want to hear soul, but I guess a lot of people don't want to really give this stuff a chance.

[32:37] There is a lot of people who do, but at the same time that's my job. I feel that's my duty to turn them on and say, whoa, but hold on, you think these bands are just like your average Tejano bands from the 90s and 80s when it reached its peak. These bands did everything DIY. They recorded themselves. They released their music on independent record labels. All their first records were English. It wasn't until later that they all started singing Spanish. Give these guys a chance. Check them out. Usually when people do take the time out to do it, they do realize like wow, this stuff is great. You know what I mean? That's pretty much where I'm at right now. I feel like that's my duty and my job.

[33:09] Because, also, when I stopped playing in bands and I wanted to hear this stuff, when I found the records and I started collecting them more, the Tex-Mex records, I started looking around like, where is this stuff being played because I want to go listen to it. I want to learn more about it, but looking around I realized there was nowhere else it was getting played. There's a million Tejano clubs in Houston, little Tejano bars around town, but they all focus on the stuff from the 90s like Selena and Mazz and all this stuff when it reached its peak and it was huge. Nobody goes into the early 70s, into the 60s where it all started, and the late 50s. That's what I wanted to hear, the roots of it.

[33:52] That's when I felt like I had a strong enough record collection to start playing bars and to start introducing this to everybody. I started scouting out places where I thought it would work. Because I didn't want to do it at your typical Tejano club because I don't think those people would enjoy it actually. I didn't think they would

get it. They're older. I mean, they just want to go drink, and they want to hear the hits. They want to hear the hits, and the stuff I spin, I spin some of the hits, but most of it, it's like a band that released one 45 and they broke up. They were a band from Houston that they did their thing. That's the stuff I focus on more, kind of the rare. At the same time I spin the hits too, but I spin a lot of the rare stuff.

[34:39] It had to be the right place. I knew it had to be a place where the people had an open mind. I'd known Nick for years, and we're kind of acquaintances. I went to the D&W, and I seen that Nick was booking there. One thing about Nick, I would always see him at Skarnales shows when he was in Skarnales. I'd see him at shows here and there, but he was the only guy from that scene that I would always see at the Tejano concerts. He was the only guy, so I knew that me and him had the same background, upbringing. We were open minded when it comes to all genres of music, but at the same time we're like three, four generation Houstonians, and we like to hear Tejano music, Houston music, Texas music.

[35:28] I told him about it, and I was like, "Hey, I got an idea, man. Like, I think it'll work here at this place because, you know, people come here, they see your band, and your band's like a big gumbo of all kind of different styles." I was like, "I think we could make it work here." I was like, "I got an idea where we should spin like, you know, Tejano oldies and R&B and soul and swamp pop because that's all connected, and I think we give it a shot and see if it works here." He was like, "Yeah, man, that's a great idea." I was excited. A few months passed, six months passed, and I didn't hear from him, so I was like, man, I guess it was just bar talk.

[36:07] Then one day he hit me up. He was like, "Hey, sorry, I've been really busy, but are you still interested in DJing over here on Sundays?" That's where we started two years ago at the D&W. Even though I DJ here and there, the D&W, I guess that's our home base. We met Manuel at the D&W. I was spinning his records, and I had no idea he was sitting at the bar. I had a record of his from 1968. I think Nick told me, he was like, "Hey, is that Manuel Mendiola and the Exiles?" I was like, "Yeah." He's like, "You know, I met him the other day, and he's sitting over there at the bar." I was like, "Really?"

[36:47] I went around the DJ booth, and I walked to the bar. I was like, "You recognize that?" He was like, "Yeah, that's me." I was like, "Oh wow, man, that's cool. Like I can't believe you're here. That's great, man." One thing about that record I had was I really liked that record, and I couldn't find nothing about them on Google or YouTube. There was like two songs of theirs on YouTube but nothing to say what happened to him or how his career went or anything like that. There was nothing, no history on the band on Google. I had always liked that record I had.

[37:19] I noticed from the record label it was on Gapoca Records, which was out of Houston, which was one of Gaston Ponce's record labels. He was a guy from Houston like Huey Meaux. He had tons of record labels, and he was putting out tons of Tex-Mex and Chicano soul and cumbia in the 60s. He was kind of like the Mexican version of Huey Meaux. Through Manuel I learned about him, and I would've never known about him.

[37:46] Me and Manual had a sit down after that, and we started talking and hanging out. He pretty much schooled me on everything Houston back then. Manuel, he was a pretty big deal back then. They would play at the Pan American Ballroom on North Main. There would be like 2,000 people there on the weekends just having fun. I learned everything, all Houston stuff through Manuel and then later on through Gus.

[38:16] Back to what you asked, has my music changed? Yes. Once I got that record collection, I instantly felt a connection with it, and I instantly fell in love with it and just as every day the passion for it and to learn about it grew more and more every day. It's Houston. These bands are just as Houston as DJ Screw. They're just as Houston as Archie Bell. They did as much work as anybody else, but for some reason there's been nobody but Gus Garza to try to keep it going. Gus Garza, he doesn't really have a connection with the younger crowd.

[38:55] When I met Gus Garza, that's where me and him bonded because he's like, "Man, my whole DJ career, I've had Bailando en Tejas going since 1968. Nobody has ever asked me about the history of the music here in Houston, I mean, no other DJ." I take that back. People have wanted to interview him, but he said no other DJ has shown interest in the history of the music from Houston, of the record labels, of the Pan American, of his story. He's like, "No other DJ has asked that, and to meet you and to see that you're thirsty for ... You want to pick my brain apart." He's like, "I'm here for you." I felt like that was just another tool to help me out on my path to learning more so I can spread as much info about this music that I can.

[39:52] Me and Gus are really good friends now. I feel like I'm just constantly learning and still on my path to where I need to be as far as DJing. When you DJ, not only are you DJing, but you kind of become a music historian. You start learning about these labels and about these musicians, and you become a historian. You're thirsty for all the stories and the knowledge. It's not just about making people dance. You hire a DJ to get your party going or to get your bar going or whatever, but on that other end it's like there's a whole story to these artists and labels that needs to be preserved. To my surprise, it really hasn't been preserved the way it should be here in Houston.

[40:48] Houston was home to probably one of the biggest Chicano soul labels, which was Huey Meaux's Tear Drop record label. They released hits and probably more hits than any other label from East LA or from, I mean, San Antonio's like the mecca of Chicano soul and Tejano. I give San Antonio their props, but I think Huey Meaux took Chicano soul further than anybody else has ever taken it before when he took Sunny & The Sunliners on American Bandstand with Dick Clark.

[41:24] Sunny was from San Antonio. He picked that record up from San Antonio. He brought Sunny to Houston, and he got Sunny a band here. He put Sunny a band together here in Houston, and he took that band and Sunny to American Bandstand. I don't think any other Chicano soul or Tejano band has ever gone that far. Although Huey was from Louisiana, he was based out of Houston. That's where he set up shop, and Freddy Fender, look how big Freddy Fender is. That's a product of Houston. That's Huey Meaux right there.

[42:01] Houston plays a big role in the music that a lot of people, when you hear Chicano soul you think of LA; when you hear Tejano you think of San Antonio. No one ever thinks of Houston. Like I said, Houston plays a big role, and somehow it's not had its proper say in the books. There's a book called Chicano Soul, and they go through the whole story of it. There's like a two-page thing on Houston, which did not give it justice, I felt like. They didn't print the most accurate stuff. Learning this from the guys who actually lived it, I wouldn't have ever known. I would've read the book and thought that that was accurate and that was right, but meeting the guys who played with Sunny and Gus Garza and the Sunliners, you hear the right stories.

[42:58] That's just where I'm at with it. I'm passionate about it. Like I said, this is the music. I'm a fifth generation Houstonian, and this is the music of my family. My parents got married at the Pan American Ballroom, which is where all this took place. This is what I'm pretty much focused on now.

Mary: [43:19] Could you talk a little bit about what music you might play with Tejas Got Soul?

Isaac: [43:28] Me and Nick started DJing, and we didn't have a name for ourselves yet. We were calling it Noches in El Barrio, just like nights in the neighborhood. We didn't have a name for it yet. When I was doing ska and reggae, I would do a night called Reggae Got Soul, which is a old song from, I can't think of it right now, what is his name? I can't think of it right now. Everybody knows this song, but it's a song called Reggae Got Soul. I used to do a night called Reggae Got Soul, and then when I started doing the Tex-Mex stuff I just switched it over to Tejas Got Soul because that's exactly what it is. It's Texas soul. It's Tejano soul.

[44:20] What you would hear at a Tejas Got Soul event is Sunny & The Sunliners, their English and Spanish. Sunny started off playing R&B. Hang on. He started off playing R&B and soul, and he later went to Tex-Mex. I play his English and his Spanish stuff. I play The Latinaires. He's probably the first guy to literally join the Latinaires, the first to start playing Chicano soul and R&B and Tex-Mex. I play the Stardusters, which were from Houston. If you come to a Tejas Got Soul event, I try to keep it mostly Houston stuff, but obviously I can't keep it all Houston.

[45:10] Basically you're more or less going to hear Texas stuff. I play Chicano soul and R&B from San Antonio, from Houston, from the Valley, from McAllen, from Austin, from El Paso. I also play not only Tex-Mex, but I play the other soul like Archie Bell and the Masters of Soul, the Masters of Houston, the T.S.U. Tornadoes. I play this stuff too, but my main focus is to play the Tex-Mex stuff. The reason why is because I feel like it's been swept under the rug and people need to hear about it. I'm not playing it just to show favor or anything or because I don't like the other stuff. I'm playing it to draw awareness and to turn people on to it because not enough people are paying this music the right attention that it deserves.

[46:08] Basically you're going to hear bands like the Stardusters from Houston. You're going to hear Little Jesse and the Rocking V's from Houston. You're going to hear Big

Lu y Los Muchachos from Houston, and all these bands were from around this area. From San Antonio you'll hear the Royal Jesters, Little Joe & The Latinaires, Dimas Garza. These guys are legends in this music. Like I said, for some reason they've just kind of been forgotten in this city. Tejas Got Soul, you're pretty much going to hear Tejas soul, Tejano soul, and Chicano soul. That's what you'd hear.

Mary: [46:49] I'm curious, did you grow up speaking Spanish?

Isaac: [46:57] No, I don't actually speak very much Spanish. Like I said, my family's been in Houston for generations, and the oldest relative I can remember was my great grandmother, who she was also born in Houston. She passed away in '98, and she was 95 years old. She spoke perfect English, but she also spoke Spanish. I never had that older relative that didn't speak English so I had to speak Spanish to them.

[47:34] On both my mom and my dad's side were from Houston for generations. My dad's side was from Second Ward and the Alacran neighborhood, and my mom's side was from First Ward over there by the courthouse, so I don't know any family ... It's been all Houston, so there's never the need to talk to me in Spanish.

Mary: [48:01] Would you describe to me a typical DJ experience? What does the room look like? There might be different types too, maybe at like the D&W.

Isaac: [48:13] Let's just say the D&W. The D&W, we go to the D&W on Sundays. It starts at 6:00. I get there at like 5:20 to start setting up. You go in there, and there's a table set up for us. There's people drinking. They're having a good time, and they're hanging out. We go in there. They usually ask me as soon as I walk in for requests. Me and Nick actually have a bet going, like who's gotten the fastest request. One time I just pulled up, and the guy came to the car. He was like, "Man, I want to hear some of this." I was like, "Dude, let me get out of the car first."

[48:49] You go in there, and there's people drinking. There's lights, and the mood is definitely set. You set up, and you get the music going. People start coming up to you and just telling you, "Oh, I remember that song," or, "Oh wow, I haven't heard that in years," or, "Oh man, you guys are actually spinning records. Wow, I haven't seen that in forever." The drinks are flowing, and the vibe is going. The music's pumping.

[49:18] Not every night is a blast. Some nights are slow. Some nights are great. I guess it just varies if there's something going on that day or sometimes surprisingly there's a full house. That's on our Sunday things. We're there every last Sunday of the month, so it's just like people expect us to be there. Sometimes they're there and sometimes they're having a blast, or sometimes there's very few people there. Every time we do it on a Friday or Saturday it's totally different. The dance floor's packed all the time. You know, it's a Friday and Saturday. My favorite place to spin is right there at the D&W unless it's at the Continental and we have a big event going on or something like that.

Mary: [50:09] Tell me a little bit more about what type of events that might be going on at the Continental Club that you might be playing at.

Isaac: [50:18] The Continental Club, we've had this thing called Tejas Roots, and it's pretty much a showcase of Nick's band plays and I DJ and Robert plays. Last year we actually brought in a extra special guest. We found one of the old guys from Houston, who was Manuel Mendiola from The Exiles. He had been retired from music for like 20, 30 years. We convinced him into playing another set, one last show. It took him some talking, but he agreed to do it.

[50:57] We had the show at the Continental, and basically it was just a showcase of Tex-Mex from the past and the present. We had Manuel, who represented the past, and Nick Gaitan, who was representing the future of Tex-Mex and the present. Then you had me in there playing my records, just playing the older stuff so that people can know where the music came from. We had tons of people out. It was a full house. People really seemed to have a great time. They were dancing, and the show went well.

[51:33] We're actually going to do another one this year. There's some guys that we're talking to about coming back from retirement and playing the show. Also, I'm going to be spinning at this in memory of Selena event this Saturday coming up. It's another Tex-Mex thing. Basically anything I'm involved in is probably going to be Tex-Mex from now on.

Mary: [51:56] Is there a difference between what you play and what Nick plays, and how are they the same and how are they different?

Isaac: [52:05] As far as DJing?

Mary: [52:06] Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Isaac: [52:07] No. Me and Nick pretty much play the same thing. We both focus on Tex-Mex, but Nick, he goes more into Louisiana with the swamp pop. I play swamp pop too, but Nick is the real reason why we play swamp pop. That's a big influence on his sound. I guess the main thing that would be different is I focus more on Texas, and Nick goes more into Louisiana. That's pretty much the only difference.

Mary: [52:35] You've talked about this a little bit, but I'm going to ask you to expand on what playing the Tex-Mex music means to you personally.

Isaac: [52:49] Okay. Playing the Tex-Mex music, it basically means everything to me. Like I said, my family's deeply rooted in this city. After I left my band and it came time for me to look around and want to go hang out at a bar that played this specific Tex-Mex music from this era, there was none. There was none to be found. I took it upon myself, and I felt that it was a duty of mine to if there was nobody out there doing it, for me to do it myself, not only because I enjoy the music but because I felt like it represents my family. It represents my culture; it represents what I'm about.

[53:37] Houston is a melting pot. I can go anywhere, I can hear cumbia. I can go anywhere, I can hear norteno. I can go anywhere, and I can hear zydeco. I can hear

ska. But this music that is rooted here in the city, I couldn't find it. I felt sad that I couldn't find it, and I felt obligated to be the person to go out there and give people that choice. If they were looking for it, it's right here. I'm very passionate about it. Like I said, this is my family. This is what my family listened to. This is what my grandparents listen to. I feel like this is what I'm supposed to be doing now.

[54:27] Nobody was doing it in this city, so I felt the need to take it upon myself to do it as far as preserving the music, playing the music from that certain era that I know I've said it before, but it has been swept under the rug. Like I said, a lot of these bands are from Houston, and it's sad that nobody knows who they are. They played in Houston for years. They released hundreds of records. They played for some great labels. The 60s was 50 years ago, and they're forgotten. I can name five Houston bands that put out multiple records to a group of people, and none of them will know one of those bands.

[55:12] That's why I DJ this music, I spin it. I try to reunite bands. I'm on the Rock & Soul Revue on Saturdays that play all this music because as long as I'm here I can't let this music just fade away. It's too good for me to let it fade away. Not only that, like I said, this is my culture. I can go all around Houston and get other people's culture if I was looking for it. I felt like mine wasn't represented, so that's why I felt a need to do it.

Mary: [55:51] You mentioned the Rock & Soul event reunion.

Isaac: [55:58] No-no, the Rock & Soul Revue.

Mary: [56:00] Revue.

Isaac: [56:01] Yeah.

Mary: [56:02] Can you tell me more about your role in that?

Isaac: [56:04] Okay. The Rock & Soul Revue, it's on KPFT HD radio, and it's on Saturday nights from 6:00 to 11:00. Basically, it's a multi-genre radio show. They had a guy doing soul from 6:00 to 7:00, and I guess he couldn't do it. He was doing basically soul, soul as in like Motown and northern soul; when you think about soul, James Brown and stuff like that. He got too busy, and he couldn't do it, so they brought me in to fill in because he couldn't do it. They brought me in as a guest. Once I got in there they dug what I was doing, and they got it. They were like, "If you want to be a part of the show, you can definitely, you can have this time slot."

[57:05] At the same time they also had asked Felipe to do that same hour. Me and Felipe have known each other for years, so we just came to an agreement, we'll just do it every other weekend. He does one Saturday, I'm off. He's off on Saturday, I'm on, he's off. We're going back and forth. Basically, I just play everything that I have in my record collection, the Tejano soul, the Texas soul and the Tex-Mex. When I say Tejas Got Soul, I'm not necessarily saying soul as in soul music, like R&B. I'm talking



about heart and soul. I'll play the conjuntos. I'll play the rancheras. I'll play the boleros. All this music, they put their soul into making it, and that's what I mean.

[57:49] Some people think that when they see Tejas Got Soul that I spin just your average soul music, which you would think of 60s soul music, but what Tejas Got Soul is, it's everything Texas and Tex-Mex. The reason why I said soul is because these guys were doing it from their heart and soul. Conjunto is accordion music. It's not soul, but I play it because that's what these guys were putting into the music. That's what you'll hear on the Rock & Soul Revue. That's what I do from 6:00 to 7:00.

[58:24] Then it's followed by Big E, Big E's Rockabilly Hour. You know Big E, he does the Rock Baby events, Rock Baby Rock It. He has the Big Kat's Barbershop. He does 7:00 to 8:00, and then Heather Fails does 8:00 to 9:00. She does a punk hour. I don't know the guys from 9:00 to 10:00, but they do hardcore, a hardcore hour. It's just a multi-genre radio show. I feel like the odd man out, but they give me motivation to keep going. They say, "Don't worry about it, you know. We get it. We dig it." It's put together by Rad Rich. Rad Rich, he's the head honcho there. He's the one who got us in, and it's his radio show actually, but he lets us do our thing.

[59:18] That's pretty much what it is. It's just a bunch of people from Houston who've been in the music scene for a long time who've been doing their thing. I'm just lucky to be a part of it. Because like I said, Felipe's also a part of it, so these guys that are on the show, they've been around the Houston music scene since the early 90s and with Rad in the 80s. I guess I'm the youngest one in the group, but they have accepted me and they appreciate what I'm doing. I appreciate them having me, so it kind of works.

Mary: [59:53] What would you say the difference between what you're doing now and what Felipe's doing?

Isaac: [1:00:00] I do the Tex-Mex stuff. Felipe, he does the Pachuco Boogie, and that is a different era. It's Pachuco music, but it's from the 40s. It's like the 40s and 50s, and it's mambo and danzon and cumbia and stuff like that. It's a different era. Felipe spins Chicano music. You'll hear a lot of Lalo Guerrero and his music. I guess he's the pioneer of Chicano music.

[1:00:35] I mean, some would say he's the pioneer of Chicano music. He gets credit for being the pioneer of Chicano music, but also going back to Houston and off the subject, Lydia Mendoza was from the Heights. She was born in the Heights, which would make her Chicana. She was playing music in the 20s, putting out records. Like I said, some would say Lalo Guerrero is the godfather of Chicano music and the first to do it, maybe because he did it in English. That's what Felipe does. He focuses on that era with the Pachuco Boogie. That's what the genre of music is called.

[1:01:18] I do the 60s stuff, which is the Chicano soul and the Tex-Mex. Tejano, the music, it's a mixture of two genres. It's conjunto and the orchestras. Conjunto was what the poorer Mexicans were listening to. They would listen to conjunto. They would have a bar, and they would clean it out and have a dance, and a conjunto band would come and play. It was an accordion, a bajo sexto, and a bass. Orchestras were

what the upper class Mexicans listened to, and it was orchestras. Tejano, they took both of those, and they mixed them, and in the middle you got Tejano. It's a mixture of orchestras and conjunto.

[1:02:04] Basically the conjunto was the lower class, and this is what anyone will tell you. Conjuntos were what the lower class listened to. Orchestras were what the upper class listened to, and Tejano came in and they were the middle class. Felipe, like I said, I'm sorry, back to the story, but Felipe does the 40s stuff, and I do the stuff from the 60s. That's the era I feel more of a connection with. Obviously Felipe feels more a connection with the stuff from the 40s. You can tell by his style, his lingo. All that is the Pachuco stuff, which was around in the 40s.

Mary: [1:02:40] What would you say about playing music that we haven't already covered in this interview?

Isaac: [1:02:52] Playing music.

Mary: [1:02:55] I mean, playing records, spinning records, but it could be about ...

Isaac: [1:02:59] Okay. I think with the records, like the actual records that I spin, the reason why I spin records as opposed to on a laptop, obviously if you spin on a laptop you have a lot more access to music, but these records honestly, they're the spark that ignited my passion for the music. These records to me are a gateway to the past, and I felt a connection to the records, which is why I spin them. These records, they have history themselves. I find records with names on them like Belinda loves Johnny forever in 1965.

[1:03:45] These records were listened to. They helped somebody get through a breakup. Someone listened to them and thought about someone that they loved. Someone listening to them missed someone who passed away in Vietnam. I feel a connection with these records, and I felt like I shouldn't just have these records put up nicely in a box or on a shelf. I want these records to fulfill their purpose, and that's to be played. That's the main thing, the main reason why I collect records and I spin them. Because I feel that they tell a story, and they're a gateway to the past. They're my connection to the past.

[1:104:31] That's what I could say about records and why I spin records as opposed to anything else. Because it would be a lot easier to spin CDs or a laptop, but like I said, these records are what got me into this whole mess. That's my look on records and why I spin them as opposed to anything else because I'm passionate about them, because they are a gateway to the past and they tell a story. There's a lot of history behind these old records. Most of my records are 50-plus years old, and they've been through so much. They've been through different hands and been put away for years. Now they're back out where they belong under the needle making people dance.

Mary: [1:05:20] Do you find that a lot of the material you have on records has been digitized and available on CD?

Isaac: [1:05:29] There's some of it. Some of it's been digitized. I've been doing a lot of it, putting a lot of the stuff on myself just so people can hear it and get familiar with it. There's also tons that has not been put on the internet yet. Once I get around to it, I'm going to start doing that also. I've started slowly.

Mary: [1:06:00] You describe many important moments in your musical career. Which experience has had the biggest impact on you?

Isaac: [1:05:08] Let's see. That's a tough question. It's a good question. I think-

Mary: [1:06:22] It could be more than one too.

Isaac: [1:05:24] Probably when my son was born. Because before that, it was always just about fun. I played in a band just to have fun and to party and to meet new people and to hang out and have fun. When my son was born, I felt like, one, that's when I quit the band that I was playing in and started DJing. I felt it was my duty to preserve the music not only for my sake but for his sake. It's his culture just as well. He's deeply rooted in Houston.

[1:07:01] I think my son being born was like a big impact on me. What I want my son to think about me when he's older, I want him to look back and see what I represented, and I want it to be positive. Not saying the bands I was in weren't positive, but I don't want to just be known for being in those bands. I want him to remember me as having a cause. Definitely my son being born was the biggest impact on me and the direction I took with my music.

Mary: [1:07:47] Very cool. This has been really great. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you want to talk about?

Isaac: [1:07:56] I think we covered everything. Let's see. I think we got everything.

Mary: [1:08:06] Great. We'll have another chance to talk too.

Isaac: [1:08:08] Yeah, awesome.

Mary: Great.

Isaac: All right.

Mary: Thank you very much.

Isaac: Thank you.

Mary: [1:08:12] I'm supposed to say something at the end. Let me do that. This concludes the interview with Isaac Rodriguez. Thank you very much for sharing all of your thoughts and wisdom with us.

Isaac: [1:08:22] No problem. Thank you.

Mary: [1:08: 24] Thank you.