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## **Between Rock and a Hard Place: Rock on the Border between Nations and Cultures**

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BETWEEN ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: ROCK ON THE BORDER BETWEEN NATIONS  
AND CULTURES

A Thesis

by

JOSE ALFONSO SANCHEZ

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2022

Major Subject: Communication

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## ABSTRACT

Between Rock and a Hard Place: Rock on the Border between Nations and Cultures (May 2022)

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Laredo, Texas has a vibrant rock music scene that has developed since the late 1960s. However, there was a time during the 1980s and early 1990s that live rock music venues were very few, and local rock bands were relegated to holding private events if they wished to perform. The history of live rock music in Laredo and its resurgence during the 1990s and 2000s was explored through interviews with local musicians, examining the role the Internet, social media, and online music platforms have played in propagating it in recent years. The result is a better understanding of this transnational and transcultural community located on the U.S.-Mexico border.

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## INTRODUCTION

As Laredo, Texas is located on the US-Mexico border in south Texas and the population is 95.4% Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), local culture has long been dominated by Mexican music genres such as Tejano, cumbia, *norteño*, *corridos*, *musica ranchera* (mariachi music), and *baladas*, as well as Spanish and Latin American pop music that is prevalent in Mexico.

I moved to this community in 1985 when I was 19 years old. I had lived in other places where local rock music scenes were very vibrant, such as San Diego and Boston. I soon began playing in Laredo's rock music scene as there was no shortage of musicians, some of whom had been active in Laredo since the 1960s, who loved rock music, and equally no shortage of people on both sides of the US-Mexico border who enjoyed listening to it. The problem was there were no venues that would hire local rock bands. One nightclub, the Whistle Stop, featured rock groups Wednesday through Saturday nights, but the proprietor would only hire bands from out of town. Another club, The Import Lot, had a similar policy but favored groups from out of town that played the latest pop hits. It was difficult, if not impossible, for local rock musicians to find venues where they could perform. Local rock bands were largely relegated to performing at private parties held in backyards, and ranches in and around the city limits. Slowly, more businesses have opened their doors to rock bands of all subgenres and their audiences. In the early 1990s, there were never more than two to four local venues hiring local rock music artists and bands in Laredo. That has changed.

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This thesis follows the model of *Howard Journal of Communications*.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns, there were at least ten nightclubs, bars, and other venues who regularly, if not exclusively, hired local rock bands. Furthermore, with the advent of the Internet and how easily anyone today can independently release their own music, there is a plentitude of local rock musicians who release and distribute their own music via online and physical media such as CDs and vinyl records.

Technology has changed the music industry (Leyshon, 2009). Computer music production software is easily attainable and almost anyone can set up a recording studio in their home with which they can produce professional quality recordings. Anyone can do this with minimal investment (less than \$100) or even for free. Gone are the days when musicians needed tens of thousands of dollars to invest in their own professional recording studios. The Internet made it easier for artists to do their own management, promotion, and distribution (Kruse, 2010). It is my argument that the Internet has helped Laredo's rock music scene to grow and thrive by providing musicians a medium by which they can promote themselves that is free of charge and allows them direct contact with their audiences.

This study investigated the development of the rock music scene in Laredo, Texas, and the role the Internet, social media, and online music platforms have played in its growth. I sought to learn about the scene's history, why it went largely underground in the 1980s, and how it resurrected during the 1990s and grew to what it is today through the experiences and recollections of local musicians. The ultimate objective was to explore border culture in its relation to live music and how a rock music scene developed in a small but rapidly expanding transcultural community, while also learning about how local musicians have utilized technology and digital media to propagate a budding music scene in a fast-growing city.

There is no denying the importance of music to the very fabric of society (Heine, 2012). It is a means by which culture is both expressed and defined and is very much a “powerful form of communication” (Heine, 2012, p. 200). It is impossible to ignore the influence of rock in the Tejano music genres so prevalent in Laredo and all south Texas. Yet, for a time, Laredo’s culture seemed reluctant to embrace a musical genre that is not only a deep part of American culture but has also permeated culture worldwide including in Mexico. By understanding this phenomenon, we will have a better understanding of Laredo’s border culture, how it has grown, and what has enabled the artistic and cultural growth of a city so rich in talent and vision.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions this study sought to answer are:

RQ1 – How has the local rock scene developed over the years, and how have Laredo musicians perceived the development?

RQ2 – What has changed in the local culture to allow a rock music scene to flourish, and what role have social media and online music platforms played in the propagation of rock music locally?

The sections that follow begin with a review of existing studies into music scenes, cultural theories that may explain the diminishing of venues that hired local rock bands in Laredo in the 1980s, and the role of media and digital technology in music scenes in general. Next, I describe my methodology, and introduce the musicians who participated in this study along with the methods I used to analyze their narratives. Finally, I discuss my findings, where I describe the story of how the local rock music scene started in the late 1960s and early 70s, its decline in the 1980s, resurgence in the 1990s, and how it has grown today. I also discuss the role of digital



technology and social media in its propagation and growth as described by musicians currently active in Laredo's rock music community.

## LOCAL AND ONLINE MUSIC COMMUNITIES

A music scene is a community of musicians, fans, and promoters. Bennett and Peterson (2004) described them as “those largely inconspicuous sites where clusters of musicians, producers, and fans explore their common musical tastes and distinctive lifestyle choices.” They are most often thought of as based within a certain location (i.e., a municipality) but can often branch out as musicians and promoters network with others like themselves, and with venues in which they can perform. This is what Bennett and Peterson refer to as “translocal.” (2004) These translocal scenes will often be specific to a genre of music. An example of this is the Tejano music scene, which encompasses south Texas (Tejeda, 2014). The Tejano music scene refers to all the bands that play this genre, the record labels who distribute their music, the radio stations that play their songs, and the venues who hire them to perform. These are not isolated to any specific city but encompass all of south Texas and even reach across the state in cities like Dallas and Houston. In fact, Tejano bands once toured across the United States performing for their fans far and wide. In the modern era, music scenes are also virtual as musicians, producers, and recording labels use the Internet to promote and distribute their music (Brae, 2018).

William Straw (1991) stated the significance of local music scenes as “systems of articulation” of culture, referring to Edward Said’s (1990) observation that mass media articulates global culture. Straw asserted that “this same system of articulation is produced by migrations of populations and the formation of cultural diaspora which have transformed the global circulation of cultural forms,” resulting in “distinctive logics of change and forms of valorization characteristic of different musical practices, as these are disseminated through their respective cultural communities and institutional sites” (p. 369). What this means in regard to Laredo’s rock music scene is that when this American genre of music was introduced to this

largely culturally Mexican community, it changed the local culture by broadening its musical palette and tastes. One of the examples Straw used to illustrate this was the rise of alternative rock. During the time of his essay, many popular music genres seemed to favor quantity of productions over quality of work. The underground local alternative rock scenes of that time gave audiences an alternative to the seemingly generic popular music being pushed by the music industry. Many of the alternative artists who came from those localities were already beginning to achieve mainstream success by the year of his article's publication, thus a new subgenre of rock music, dubbed "alternative," was born. By 1992, the Billboard charts, MTV, and radio stations across the United States, including Laredo, were dominated by songs by many of these artists such as Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and REM. It was the emergence of these bands and artists from cities and towns well outside any of the American entertainment hubs of Los Angeles, Nashville, and New York that began to underscore the importance of local music scenes in American culture (Nirvana and Pearl Jam were from Seattle, while REM hailed from Atlanta).

Heine (2012) defined local music scenes as "the whole collection of various genre-based music scenes that exist within the physical constraints of a city's metropolitan area" (p. 201). She further elaborated, "in a world that feels increasingly impersonal, anonymous, and intangible, the music scene is an enduring palpable expression of the character of a place and its people" (p. 201) While smaller than what is found in other cities, Laredo's general music scene is rich in genres, which include Tejano, Mexican folk and folk-based music genres, country, English and Spanish language pop, classical, and rock. Heine further argues that "vibrant" music scenes often have other types of scenes, "such as a restaurant scene" or a nightclub scene, which feed the music scene and vice-versa. As such, she lists a set of conditions that are necessary for a "vibrant music scene." Those conditions include: "a connected community of musicians and promoters, a

record label, a recording studio, a prominent festival, a great local radio station, a local music blog, a forward-thinking municipal government, and access to capital for emerging music businesses” (p. 203). While all of these, minus the blogs perhaps, are in place for other genres in Laredo, particularly Tejano and Mexican music genres, the rock music scene has subsisted with only the community of rock musicians and promoters, and an audience of people who enjoy the music.

### **Moral Panic**

There has always been an audience for rock music in Laredo since the genre first appeared in the 1950s. Many native Laredoans grew up in the 1950s and 60s listening to the pop and rock music of those times. I have heard them reminisce about their favorite songs and where they heard them the first time, whether it was on a juke box at a teen hangout, or a record being played at a high school dance. Furthermore, there was never any shortage of record and music stores, such as the now defunct Musicland and Sam Goody, where anyone could purchase the latest rock albums.

Yet, if you were a young musician in the 1980s who formed a rock band, there were only one or two venues to play in Laredo if any at all, and they favored out-of-town talent from Austin. On the other hand, if your band played Mexican or *Tejano* music, there were plenty of “gigs” to play. Why, then, did local venue owners and promoters reject and alienate local rock bands for so long? If there was enough of a market in Laredo for businesses to sell rock records, and enough interest in it for people to want to pick up an instrument play that kind of music, surely it would have been just as lucrative for venues to hire local rock talent. Why the stigma?

The term “moral panics” was coined by sociologist and criminologist Stanley Cohen who defined it as something that occurs when a “condition, episode, person or group of people

emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cauthen & Jasper, 1994, p. 495). Cauthen and Jasper further characterized it as “sudden hysteria about an activity – drug use, rock music, sexual abuse, pornography, drinking – accompanied by calls for suppression” (1994, p. 495). In the 1950s, rock n’ roll became a moral panic because conservative and Christian groups believed it would lead to race mixing, which would corrupt America’s youth and lead them to debauchery According to Steve Williams, “one of the moral panics associated with the first wave of rock ‘n’ roll was the fear of race mixing – that young black and white kids would get together over this music that had a rhythmic, primitive, sensuous beat. Suburban moms and dads are freaked out about their daughters hanging out with young black men listening to sexualized music (2017). In fact, conservatives and Christians found reasons for rock to be a moral panic every decade through the 1990s (Williams, 2017). Even in the UK, “moral panics,” explained the way British citizens felt about quarrelling groups of youths known as “Mods” and “Rockers” fighting in the streets of the UK in the early 1960s. Interestingly, among the differences between mods and rockers were their musical tastes, as the Mods favored R&B and newer British rock while the Rockers liked older American rock from the 1950s (Williams, 2017). British media made the situation more impressionable to the public than it should have been, and Cohen explained that the media’s sensationalism of these events created “moral panic” among normal citizens (Williams, 2017).

Moral panics led to outright censorship of rock music on American television in the 1950s and 60s. Elvis Presley was notorious for swinging his hips while he performed. The controversy over it caused CBS to demand he be shown only from the waist up when he appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1957. Elvis never appeared on the show again (SOFA Entertainment, 2021). In the 1960s, moral panics surrounding rock music turned to drug use

because bands were not hiding their own activities and wrote songs about them. According to Williams, “The Beatles were admitting in interviews that they did LSD. A Harvard psychology professor, Timothy Leary, told people to ‘tune in, turn on and drop out.’ You had Jefferson Airplane in 1967 singing about ‘feeding your head’ and smoking caterpillars. Suddenly the drugs and sexuality were overt” (2017). When the Doors appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1967, they were going to perform their hit song, “Light My Fire.” The song featured a line that said, “girl, we couldn’t get much higher.” Because the word “higher” could be construed as being associated with drug use, especially coming from a rock band, the show’s producer asked the band’s singer, Jim Morrison, to change it to something else just for this performance. When the band played the song live on the air, Morrison sang the line just as it had been written. They were banished from ever appearing on the show again (SOFA Entertainment, 2021). Indeed, moral panic hysteria against rock music continued well beyond the 1960s.

In the 1980s, there was moral panic hysteria over pop, rock, and heavy metal music. Parent groups felt that much of the lyrics were not only obscene, but that a lot, if not all, of it was outright satanic (Kelly, 2015). In 1985, Tipper Gore, wife of then Tennessee senator Al Gore, formed the Parent Music Resource Center (PMRC), which demanded record companies and artists be accountable for the content of their music. The PMRC “singled out several songs deemed objectionable, the so-called ‘Filthy 15,’ consisting of both well-known and relatively obscure songs by such performers as Sheena Easton, Cindy Lauper, Madonna, Mary Jane Girls, Judas Priest, AC/DC, Mercyful Fate, and Venom” (Deflem, 2020, p. 8). This resulted in record companies placing warning labels on albums containing explicit lyrics. The practice continues to this day (Deflem, 2020).

Laredo was certainly not immune to this phenomenon. While the city did not respond to rock music in the 1960s and 70s the way other Americans did, decrying it for the debauchery and substance abuse with which it was connotated, it did respond to local rock groups in a negative manner in the 1980s because of illicit activity and violence that would occur at private parties where the bands would perform. As will be discussed, some local bands earned a bad reputation for attracting hooligans who would cause trouble at their shows. This, unfortunately, was projected to any local bands who played rock music.

### **Local Music and the Media Connection**

While local rock bands in Laredo remained largely underground through the 1980s, it is interesting the scene began to come above ground and flourish openly in bars and nightclubs in the 1990s and 2000s as computers and the Internet became increasingly ubiquitous worldwide. The advancement of recording software resulted in “the rise of more affordable digital recording rigs and easier programming protocols,” which creates “a democratization of technology, making available a process that was once accessible only through the facilities and skills provided by a recording studio.” (Leyshon, 2009, p. 1309) Thus, technology has made professional-quality recording and music production possible for the average musician. What was once only attainable at big professional recording studios has become something anyone with a computer and access to the software can create with relative ease.

Digital technology provided new means not only for local artists to create music, but also to distribute it and promote themselves. Since the introduction of the Internet to the world, “music can now be disseminated online, and people can connect easily across localities, regions, countries, and continents” (Kruse, 2010, p. 625). The Internet shapes music distribution via easy access to streaming services such as Spotify and iTunes, and inexpensive professional digital

distribution services such as Distrokid and CD Baby (Brae, 2018). The World Wide Web has also proven “useful for creating and maintaining contacts in music scenes that are also face to face connections” (Kruse, 2010, p. 636) and the introduction of social media has only increased interaction and reach for musicians, promoters, and fans alike.

Andrea Baker (2016) underscored how music scenes in smaller cities are not only competing with, but altogether replacing America’s entertainment hubs of Los Angeles and New York. She noted that the Internet has caused a restructuring of the music industry, and now music is “omnipresent, mobile, and appears to have no geographical heart” (Baker, 2016, p. 334). New York and Los Angeles have been the central hubs of the music industry in the United States. In the past, if you were a musician and you wanted to build a career in the music industry as a songwriter, performer, or both, you had to move to one of these cities if you hoped to be noticed by a major recording company. Technology has made it easier for musicians, even in the most suburban or even rural settings, to create professional quality recordings for very little cost (Leyshon, 2009) and to reach out far beyond their enclaves making such a move, and even the attention and approval of a major record label, unnecessary. Baker uses Austin, Texas as one of her examples of American cities that have become notable competitors to the “superstar music cities.” The city has long been known as “the live music capitol of the world” and is host to the television show “Austin City Limits,” which is “the longest running television music program in the world,” and the annual SXSW music festival, which has become a major music industry conference in the United States (Baker, 2016, p. 345).

While some thought that the Internet and online music distribution would cause some local music scenes to dwindle and fade away, digital technology has turned out to be the driving force that empowers them. Holly Kruse (2010) used archival resources and interviews to support



her argument that although music production and distribution are no longer centralized and have become global, local scenes still maintain their own distinctiveness based on their location, history, and culture. Because music is very often “identified with specific geographical and physical spaces,” the way it is understood “in relation to local identity is important” (Kruse, 2010, p. 628). She further explains that, in music scenes, “subjectivities and identities were formed, changed, and maintained within localities that were constituted by geographical boundaries, by networks of social relationships, by a sense of local history, and in opposition to other localities” (Kruse, 2010, p. 628). Music artists are produced locally, they distinguish themselves and their music via the influence of their local histories and cultures, and the Internet and digital media are the vehicles by which they reach potentially limitless audiences.

### **The Internet and Social Media**

Facebook is filled with pages and profiles of local bands, venues, and promoters who advertise their shows on a weekly basis and even provide photos and videos of their performances and interactions with fans. Band members themselves regularly share their post-performance insights on their own profiles, and regularly discuss the evening’s highlights with those who attended via comments. Facebook groups, such as one called Laredo Musicians Registry, have served as places where local musicians share ideas and inspirations, and seek other musicians with whom to collaborate.

Verboord and Noord (2016) studied how social media can even the playing field for music artists who live in more outlying cities as opposed to those in industrial hubs like New York and Los Angeles. Their results demonstrated that artists coming from established music hub have better chances of getting media attention than those from other cities. However, according to the authors, utilizing social media as a means of reaching out to potential fans can offset some

of this disparity. Through these online media, bands and venues not only reach more audiences but also create new connections with other musicians and venues, thus propagating interest and growth. The effects of online media and the ease with which any artist can gain exposure via social networks like Facebook and user/creator-driven media platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud has been felt by traditional media outlets.

The Top of the Pops was a weekly popular music television show, much like American Bandstand with Dick Clark, that ran on the BBC in the UK. After 42 years, it aired its last episode in the summer of 2006. David Beer (2006) wrote about how the demise of this show might be related to what media studies professor Mark Poster called the “Second Media Age,” which “is defined by the emergence of decentralized and multidimensional media structures that usurp the broadcast models of the first media age” (Beer, 2006, p. 1). The author argued that the emergence of social media during the time this article was written heralded the coming of this second age of media. This relates to local music scenes because of how social media is used by artists to promote themselves, engage with fans, and even share their music and performances. In many ways, social media and online platforms have replaced television shows like Top of the Pops and American Bandstand.

There has certainly been enough interest in rock music among people in Laredo for musicians to want to want to play it and audiences to want to listen to it in the first place, but venues for live rock music were more limited in Laredo during the 1980s. Whether the increase in audiences and venues involves changing attitudes towards rock music among some Laredoans, the city’s growth and changing demographics, or a combination of both is what I aimed to discover in this study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

I chose a qualitative approach because this study involved personal experiences and interpretations of them rather than statistical outcomes. One of the key responsibilities of qualitative research is “to study human symbolic action in the various contexts of its performance” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 4). “The interaction between performances and practices,” which is at the very heart of qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 5), is also descriptive of what makes a local music scene tick. Therefore, a qualitative approach was the optimal way to investigate the local music scene in Laredo, Texas.

### Interviews

Previous studies into music scenes, such as Kruse (2010) and Heine (2012), have drawn data from interviews with musicians who are participants in their local scenes. As interviews “resemble conversations between equals who systematically explore topics of mutual interest,” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 3) it was the best way to uncover the narrative of how the Laredo rock music scene has developed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and because it was preferable for some of my subjects than online video conferencing, I opted to conduct all my interviews via telephone. Sturges & Hanrahan conducted research comparing face-to-face and telephone interviews and found “that telephone interviews can be used productively in qualitative research.” (2004) While face-to-face interviews, even via Zoom, are considered preferable by some researchers, telephone interviews are “just as good for eliciting stories and information” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019, p. 240).

As I have been an active musician in Laredo since moving here almost forty years ago, I could not help but to be guided by my own observations and memories of the music scene. In earlier conversations I had with some local musicians, I found that their descriptions of the

evolution of the rock music scene often differed from mine. Their memories came from the perspective of having lived in Laredo all their lives and witnessing the music scene from a very young age before growing to become participants, as opposed to that of someone who arrived in the city as a young adult and only experienced part of the story. Relying on information gathered through interviews with local musicians, who have not only been active in Laredo for many years but also grew up here, and thus filling the contextual blanks in my own recollections and interpretations, was the only way for me to truly discover the narrative of how the rock music scene began and developed over the decades. It was through their stories, recollections, and observations that I traced the history of the rock music scene in Laredo and learned about the factors that have contributed to its growth. As such, my goal was not to confirm my own experiences and opinions but to uncover the real story of how the rock music scene began and developed to the present day through their eyes and ears.

I interviewed nine local musicians who became active in the local scene at different times over five decades, from the 1960s to the present, and have been highly active on the local scene for many years. As Laredo, Texas has been a small city for much of its existence, professional musicians who remain active for many years are few in this community. I chose these individuals because they have direct experience of playing in Laredo and other music scenes.

My first three choices were musicians who have been involved in Laredo's rock music scene the longest. Raul Flores has played in Laredo since the 1960s. Another well-known veteran musician is Chale Castillo, a drummer who has played in country, Tejano, and rock bands locally since the 1960s. He has played on countless albums with many popular Tejano music stars, including Grammy Award winners *Little Joe y La Familia*. Bridging a generational divide is Al Rubio, who has been playing rock music in Laredo since the late 1970s. Rubio also has

experience playing in the local scenes in Miami and Austin. He has also been a radio DJ for more than three decades.

A guitarist on the local scene since the 1980s, Rick Castillo owned a local live music venue, *The Electric Lounge* until it closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. He brought the perspective of someone who has been both a musician and venue owner in the local rock scene. A principal participant in the Laredo rock music scene ever since he was in high school, Moni Godines is a highly respected local guitar virtuoso and music teacher who has graced the scene on both sides of the border since the 1990s. Another local guitar virtuoso is Jose Santacruz, who releases original guitar instrumental albums on Spotify and other online streaming platforms. A long-time staple of original music in Laredo, Carlos Imperial is a local guitarist and singer who has devoted himself to playing his own music exclusively. He has produced and self-released a plethora of albums on cassette and CD since the 1990s.

Mark Guerrero is a vocalist who started on the local scene performing classic rock covers while still in high school in the early 90s and became one of Laredo's most prominent band leaders. His group covers everything from Tex-Mex music and cumbias to 50s oldies, country, classic rock, and Spanish language pop/rock. Representing the younger generation and an outsider to Laredo, Andy Sanchez hails from Dallas where he works in the music industry. He came to Laredo for a time to participate in the local scene. I included him because I wanted to learn about what would attract someone from a city with a much larger music scene to Laredo.

From their recollections, I was able to learn the history of Laredo's rock music scene and how it has changed over the years. Some of my interview subjects have been involved with recording and releasing original music online and through older mediums (cassette, CD, vinyl). From them, I learned the impact online music distribution and social media has had on the scene.

I began the interviews with questions about their interest in rock music. “How did you become interested in playing rock music as opposed to genres that were more popular and socially accepted locally?” “Why do you think rock music was largely shunned by local venues in Laredo in the past?” “What motivated you to keep playing rock music in Laredo despite the lack of venues in which to perform?”

Next, I asked questions about the history of the local scene from their perspective. “What was the scene like when you started playing?” “From your perspective, how did the rock music scene develop into what it is today?” “What do you feel has changed in Laredo for there to be so much more interest in local rock and, subsequently, more venues?” These questions were important because they directly addressed the first part of my second research question.

Finally, I asked them questions about how they use the internet to promote and propagate their music. “Which online streaming services do you use?” This would mean where they listen to music, but also where they distribute their own works if they use it in that way. “Which social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) do you use?” Some artists stick to one platform, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, while others maximize their reach by using several. “How do you use social media to reach your audiences and attract more people to your shows and music?” Whether through their own personal accounts or separate accounts for their music, different people will use social media in different ways, such as posting video clips of their performances, posting photos, or simply posting information about upcoming shows. “How has social media and the accessibility of online music streaming services to artists helped local music artists promote their work?” Opinions vary on this topic, as some may feel left behind when it comes to how much attention they can attract to their bands and could believe that it only helps groups that are already well established. “How has it helped kindle interest in rock music groups

locally?” Again, some may feel local artists can more effectively rely on simple word of mouth than they can on being able to generate an online fan base. “What feedback do you get on social media from those who attend your shows?” There are actually musicians, particularly older ones, who hardly use social media at all. “How has social media been helpful to you in promoting and advertising your shows?” A follow-up question to this would be, “how do you feel about newspaper and radio advertisements of shows and events at local nightclubs and other venues versus social media promotion?” Some may feel that the older methods of advertising via paper flyers, newspaper, and radio may be more effective for local bands than social media. I also asked them to explain how digital recording and online media has increased or enhanced their creativity.

### **Analysis**

Following the process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I generated transcripts of the interviews using online audio transcription tools. Next, I listed ideas and concepts that emerged in their responses, making note of those that were in common between respondents while not leaving out those that were more particular to an individual interviewee. I utilized this method to find keywords and themes describing the scene, its history, and any changes my subjects have perceived through the years, the impact the internet and social media have had, and any other developments they described from their experiences and observations as direct participants.

Some of the themes that emerged included local culture and the prevalence of Mexican music genres, changing demographics and rapid growth of the city, the preference of venues in the 1980s to hire bands from out of town instead of local, new music programs at local educational institutions, and the changing media landscape which one participant referred to as

“the death of radio.” Themes related to technology were diverse and included social media, access to learning via websites and services such as YouTube, digital recording, online music distribution, and the use of social media for promotion.



## THE LAREDO ROCK MUSIC SCENE

The scene in Laredo began in the 1960s when local musicians began performing rock music at local venues, whose owners were not reluctant to hire rock bands and music groups of other genres at the same establishments. Laredo's population adopted rock music as part of their local culture and enjoyed it along with other non-Hispanic music genres and Mexican music. The dwindling of venues that would hire local rock bands in Laredo during the 1980s was due to the prevalence of other new music genres, which attracted more audiences to business establishments that hired live music, and incidents of violence, drunkenness, and illegal activity at private events where local rock bands played. The few places that still hired rock bands during that period favored professional groups from out of town, leaving local musicians to host their own events independently at backyards and ranches in the surrounding rural area. The music genre that became most popular in Laredo during that period was Tejano music, which was a hybrid music style with a Mexican *Norteño* music foundation and elements of north American genres.

Renewed interest in local talent led to a resurgence of venues hiring local rock bands in the 1990s, this time exclusively. New educational institutions devoted to the arts led to more musicians who benefitted from the tutelage of their predecessors. As more people moved to Laredo in the early 2000s and the population increased, audiences for rock music grew as well. These new Laredoans were more open and outgoing, and added more enthusiastic reception of local rock bands making the nightlife more vibrant. The advent of digital technology further fueled the scene as it provided newer and better tools for creativity, distribution of original music, and promotion of shows for bands and venues alike.

## **The Early Scene - 1960s and 70s**

Musicians in Laredo, Texas took an interest in rock music as quickly as the genre gained popularity through the 1950s and 1960s. It was during the late 1960s and early 1970s that Chale Castillo and Raul Flores began their respective careers as musicians.

Castillo started performing with his first band in 1967 when he was a teenager. “There was a club across from Lamar Middle School where we would play all rock music. We would play Jimi Hendrix, Steppenwolf, Janis Joplin, the Doors, all that stuff,” He said. Flores began playing on the scene in the early 1970s. “There were actually a lot of places to gig, but then around the ‘80s it kind of like got cut off and that's when the scene died down a little bit,” he recalled, referring to the decline of rock music in Laredo that would come later.

To Castillo’s and Flores’ memories, there were plenty of musicians and bands for a city the size of Laredo in those days, which was much smaller than it is today with a population just over 69,000 in 1970 (*Texas Almanac: City population history from 1850–2000*). According to Castillo, there was no shortage of places to play. “There were more clubs back then than now, you know,” he recalled.

Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, there were ten venues in Laredo that hired rock bands exclusively. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, bars, clubs, restaurants, and other venues were not selective of what music genres their live bands played. Although the city was much smaller than it is today, rock bands were not limited to places that only hired rock bands; they could play anywhere they wanted. Thus, with all venues in the city being available to all musicians and bands, they had more places to choose from regardless of what kind of music they played.

This is notable because music genres are commonly segregated by venue in other cities, with some hosting primarily rock, others country, jazz, etc. Venues in Laredo largely preferred to

offer a variety of music to their patrons. This denotes that people in Laredo during this period were more open to different kinds of music, as opposed to being closed to anything that wasn't either familiar or indigenous to the local Mexican-American culture. It was as Duke Ellington once wrote: "There are simply two kinds of music, good music and the other kind... The only yardstick by which it should be judged is simply that of how it sounds." (1962, p. 96) Thus, as far as audiences in Laredo were concerned, if it sounded good, it was good, and it didn't matter where it was from.

Nevertheless, it was always wise to play the more popular rock and pop tunes and to be familiar with the Mexican and Spanish music that has always dominated this part of the United States – Mexico border. "We're in a border city," said Castillo, "that's why you have to play the other stuff (Mexican music). If you go to San Antonio, there's rock, there's country, and even jazz, but here you have to play everything. You have to go where the money's at."

Thus, a music scene as defined by Bennett and Peterson (2004), Straw (1991), and Heine (2012) very much existed in Laredo, Texas when it had a smaller population of 69,000-91,000 between 1970 and 1980 (*Texas Almanac: City population history from 1850–2000*). Furthermore, with the acceptance of rock music in the same bars and venues as the more mainstream music genres of the south Texas border region, we see a sort of "system of articulation" and "logic of change" discussed by Straw. The introduction of rock music in these venues was indicative of a cultural shift that was characterized by the "valorization" of "different musical practices" being "disseminated through their respective cultural communities," (Straw, 1991, p. 369) personified by rock music being welcomed along with all other music genres whether or not they were inherent of the largely Mexican ethnicity of the area or the American southwestern culture of

Texas. The articulation and change Straw refers to is seen in the broadening of the local musical palette and broadened musical tastes.

However, this music scene differed somewhat from Heine's definition in that it was not yet based on genres like it is today. Music groups of all styles existed in one scene, and performed in all local venues, as opposed to there being a rock scene, a Mexican *conjunto* music scene, a country music scene, etc. It was simply made up of musicians who played what they and their audiences liked without any thought over what style they were playing or where it came from. Whether it was a Mexican *corrido* or the latest American Top 40 hit, it was enjoyed by local performers and audiences alike.

This denoted a merging of cultures which further added color to an already hybrid Mexican-American culture, as opposed to cultural clash or conflict. It was neither a matter of Laredoans assimilating themselves to American culture but rather vice versa, as they were assimilating it to their own way of life; they took what music they liked and made it their own. This is evident in the Tejano music that arose in the late 1970s and rose to prominence in Laredo and south Texas in the 1980s, which combined northern Mexican music genres with rock music and other non-Latin American genres of music. As long time rock and Tejano drummer Chale Castillo asserted, "Even in the Tejano *polkas* and *cumbias*, you can hear rock music." Raul Flores cited another example from a city not very far north of the border, "one of the good examples are the Navaira brothers (sons of late Tejano music legend Emilio Navaira) who have a beautiful band called 'The Bandoleros' in San Antonio...they put (Mexican style) accordion music to their rock songs, but the rock songs that they write are exactly like Beatle-esque or Badfinger type of music, which I love." The assimilation of rock music into Latin American

culture is also apparent with the music of Mexican and South American rock groups such as Mana, Caifanes, El Tri, Soda Estereo, and Los Enanitos Verdes.

Furthermore, whereas this was a small music scene in a growing town that had not yet reached the size of a proper city, it was nevertheless quite vibrant despite the lack of some of the conditions Heine deemed necessary. There were no record labels in Laredo and local radio offered no support aside from running paid advertisements for the venues if they even purchased any. The thing that kept this scene alive was simply a community of people who enjoyed music.

As the 1970s progressed, new music genres developed and musicians had to adapt. The disco music craze of the late 1970s had a significant effect on popular music worldwide. “In the 70s, we ended up playing disco to survive,” exclaimed Castillo. However, in the early 1980s, south Texas was the breeding ground for the new wave of latin music known as Tejano, that was based upon the *cumbia* and *polka* styles prevalent in Mexican *norteño* music but influenced by American genres such as rock, jazz, and country (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2021).

That a hybrid music genre emerged in south Texas is not surprising, as venues which had traditionally had Mexican music as their primary entertainment had been hiring rock bands to perform as well. Thus, musicians who were accustomed to hearing, and sometimes playing, all those genres simply combined them into something original and indigenous to the south Texas border communities. As Tejano music gained popularity in south Texas, more and more musicians and bands turned from rock and English-language popular music to Tejano altogether to follow the trend and seek greater successes.

### **The Dry Spell of the 1980s**

Al Rubio began playing in the local rock music scene during the late 1970s. “The thing kind of peaked around 1970, at least locally, and kind of peaked around 1977, 78, or 79, and was

on the downside as 1980 rolled around and that's more or less when I started.” He remembers that crossing over to Tejano music paid a lot more than staying in rock bands. “At that time you had the beginnings of the Tejano scene so, you know, rock itself was kind of getting drained away of some of the musicians that were in these bands. They were going off to form or join Tejano bands because of the lucrative aspect.” According to Raul Flores, the popularity of Tejano music overtaking rock music in Laredo made sense. He noted, “well, it's basically that Laredo has grown with that particular type of music, like Ranchero, Tejano, accordion music (Mexican *norteño* music), mariachi music, romantic trios. It was the culture here in Laredo.” Chale Castillo concurred, “We’re in a border town. We had to play all that stuff: a lot of *polkas* and *cumbias*.”

During the 1980s, there was one venue in Laredo that would still hire rock bands, and did so exclusively. The club was called The Whistle Stop and was located at one of Laredo’s largest landmarks, Mall Del Norte. However, there was one catch; the proprietors did not welcome local talent. They would only hire bands from out of town.

Al Rubio recalled, “One day, we heard that the Whistle Stop was in a jam because their band for that week had canceled. So we took it upon ourselves to go out to the Whistle Stop and say ‘Hey, you know, we're available.’ We had several gigs under our belts and people were giving us a lot of compliments and whatnot. The guy was adamant. ‘Nope. I don't hire local bands!’ So, you know, we kind of left him with the idea of like well if you change your mind call us. ‘No, I'm not going to change my mind! I don't hire local bands!’ Okay, fine. So the next afternoon, he calls me. He goes, ‘you guys still available?’ I said, ‘Yeah, why?’ He says ‘I'm gonna hire you.’” His band had a successful week at the establishment and was able to get enough attention to procure more private gigs, but the Whistle Stop quickly went back to their practice of only hiring talent from other cities and kept up with the practice until it closed

permanently in 1987. Another night club, The Import Lot, which was located in Laredo's prestigious La Posada Hotel, also had a similar policy but favoring pop cover groups from San Antonio and Austin. With all other venues in Laredo fervently preferring to hire Tejano bands through the 1980s, local rock bands were relegated to playing at private parties or self-organized events. "We were just waiting for a chance to say, 'hey, you know what? We're as good as those other bands. We can do that too, and we're here in your city,'" said Moni Godines, a guitarist who joined the local rock scene during the following decade.

While the owners and managers of these two venues could not be found for interviews, I can only speculate that their reasons for hiring only out-of-town bands was that they believed these groups, who had managers and worked through booking agencies unlike Laredo bands who managed their own business affairs, were more professional and would provide a higher standard of entertainment. These establishments were competing with Tejano music venues which attracted more patrons, as those groups often had the backing of record labels in nearby San Antonio, Texas which included professional marketing, and was something local rock bands just did not have. I surmise that they felt that they would need to offer only the best bands they could hire in order to attract audiences. Apparently, they had contact with the agencies booking regional and national acts in order to be able to bring them to Laredo every week.

Also, The Whistle Stop often had bands who played their own original music. Well-known regional bands of the time, such as Omar and the Howlers, would perform their latest releases at this small Laredo venue. While Laredo had its share of rock musicians who wrote their own songs, they carried a rather bad reputation.

Al Rubio recalled how they would prepare for a self-organized show at a ranch or backyard, "They already had this whole thing where they would do these private parties and they

would generate their own money because they would charge an admission fee, and all they had to offer (aside from the music) was what they called “trash can punch.” They would go across the river (to Mexico) and buy these gallon jugs of Everclear, and they bring those back. Then, they would buy brand-spanking-new fresh plastic trash cans from either Woolco or Walmart. They would put I don't know how many envelopes of flavored Kool-Aid in there with the Everclear and then fill the rest up with water from the *mangera* (garden hose) and people would just dunk their Dixie cups in there and just get plastered on that stuff.”

“After a certain period of time, it (original rock bands) started to get associated with the wrong side of town or the wrong element,” said Al Rubio. “It started kind of being connected with trouble. You know, ‘whenever there's a party with the rock bands, there's a fight,’ or ‘whenever there's a party with the rock bands they get arrested for smoking out or something.’” Back yard rock parties, and those held at ranches in the outlying rural area, were notorious for being the sites of brawls and illicit activity involving drug use. It was common for local police, who often only came responding to noise complaints, to end up arresting people caught with illegal substances. With little to no security at these events, fights would often break out. Thus, due to the misdeeds of a few, negative connotations drove these venues, and probably some audiences, to avoid local rock bands. The “moral panics” (Williams, 2017) already associated with rock music due to connections with Satanism and obscenity (Kelly, 2015) certainly did not help matters.

### **The Roaring 90s**

By 1990, clubs and bars that hired local rock bands began to appear. Rick Castillo played with Al Rubio in a band called Close Call during that time. “It was very limited and it changed through the years and it picked up,” Rick Castillo recalled. In 1990, two restaurant/bars,



Charlie's Corona and El Meson, had rock bands performing every Friday and Saturday night. In 1993, a third bar, Conchita's, opened on Laredo's main strip, San Bernardo Boulevard. More and more rock cover bands began to form, and performed regularly at these venues. Al Rubio noted, "if you played rock covers, you could find your way around and find jobs and find gigs." Bands that played original music, however, found the local scene more daunting.

Historically, Laredo audiences, and venue owners, preferred to hear popular rock tunes with which they were already familiar. Music scenes in larger cities, such as Austin and Los Angeles, will have a thriving community of rock bands who perform their own original music. Local audiences in Laredo were slow to warm up to music they were not already familiar with, and venue owners were reluctant to work with original bands due to the negative connotations associated with them. "You started to have this kind of 'well, you know, we're not going to hire bands that play their own music,'" recalled Al Rubio. "If you play the stuff that we hear on the radio, that's fine." Brawls and drug busts at self-promoted events in the 1980s caused audiences to be less open to bands who played original music.

It should be noted that this aversion only continued to be applied to rock bands who played their own original music, and not bands who covered popular songs by well-known artists. It would have been easy to generalize all local rock musicians to be hooligans and ruffians, and to assume that criminal activity followed them wherever they went, but audiences generally felt safe if a group played music with which they were already familiar, especially if they already liked the songs. Venues that hired live bands in the 1980s favored Tejano music because it would bring in more people and generate more revenue, not because of any worries about violence or illicit activity at their businesses. After all, plenty of local rock musicians, like

Chale Castillo, were known for playing in Tejano and even country music groups, as well as rock bands.

However, in the 1990s, one venue opened its doors to original rock groups of every subgenre, no matter how extreme or heavy. The type of restaurant was somewhat out of the norm for a live original rock music venue. Sal's Pizza was a popular restaurant in Laredo since the 1970s. It specialized in authentic New York Style pizza with locations on San Bernardo Boulevard and at Mall Del Norte, where customers could buy two slices of pizza and a soft drink for \$2. As such, it was very popular with the younger generation. In the early 1990s, the restaurant on San Bernardo began letting original rock, metal, and punk bands perform their music on weekends. As the restaurant was strictly a pizzeria and did not have a bar, there was no age limit for audiences or performers. There was no pay, as is usually the case for original bands in other American cities, and the groups were expected to do their own advertising and promotion.

Carlos Imperial was one of the musicians who would frequently perform at Sal's with his band. "Sal's was the place that would welcome you. It didn't matter if you played rock, punk, or metal. It was open to all kinds of music as long as you were willing to put in the time to make flyers and bring people."

Thus, the 1990s marked a turning point for Laredo's rock music scene. The city, which now had a larger population of almost 123,000 people (*Texas Almanac: City population history from 1850–2000*), had four venues that featured live rock music every weekend: one of which welcomed bands who played their own original songs. Moni Godines recalled, "It was a handful of places that had rock music, but they had it all the time. Those places were good about rotating the bands and changing it up." More live rock venues opened through that decade and, unlike

bars like The Whistle Stop that hired only bands from out of town, they preferred local talent and rarely hired outside talent.

Godines' observation goes back to what Heine (2012) wrote about different types of scenes "cross-pollinating" (p. 203). The local restaurants and bars that hired bands did so to attract customers and keep them there, while the bands acquired more fans and got more gigs. As the 1990s and the 20th century ended, this cross-pollination between local rock bands and venues led to growth for both scenes, as more bars and restaurants that would hire live music opened and more rock bands formed to perform in them.

### **The New Millennium and the New Scene**

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century found Laredo very different from what it was 30 years prior. The city's population grew significantly, and the arts scene in general also grew. The Laredo Center for the Arts opened in 1993 and featured work from local artists. In the same year, the Laredo Independent School District started its first magnet school program, the Vidal M. Treviño School of Fine Arts and Communication, known locally as VMT. Aside from classes in journalism and television and radio broadcasting, the school offered formal instruction in art, theater, dance, and music for local high school students. Plus, for a long time, the school also offered classes in professional studio recording. In fact, local musicians of all genres worked at the school teaching guitar and electric bass, and those with recording experience taught music production in the school's recording studio. New amateur theater groups had sprung up presenting musical plays and dramas on a seasonal basis, and the local 4-year institute of higher learning, Texas A&M International University, had begun offering undergraduate degrees in music and art which were previously unavailable in Laredo.

Thus, not only were there now more musicians in Laredo, but many were formally and classically trained thanks to VMT and their staff of experienced local musicians. The cross-pollination between local artists and venues became evident in educational institutions as Laredo not only acquired a 4-year degree program for music, but a performing arts high school.

As the city grew, so did the population's musical taste and openness to new and different styles of music. Tejano bands were still plentiful, but the growing rock scene was on the rise and bigger than before. There were lots of bands to join and a good number of venues in which to perform regularly. In a city where musicians once turned from rock music to play other styles of music that were more lucrative, it was now feasible to join a group that performed any variety of music (country, Tejano, and pop) and turn it into a band that played rock covers exclusively.

Even original rock music began to flourish. Clubs like The Cold Brew and AJ's regularly hired rock bands who played original songs. This trend has gotten even bigger in the present day. Jose Santacruz is a local guitarist who played in a popular cover band called Fusion for many years, but later ventured into original rock guitar instrumental music and self-released a solo album. He was approached by the owner of a bar called The Rooftop Lounge. "When they approached me about playing solo gigs there, he told me, 'I want you to play what you want to play.' After all the years I've been a musician, this was the first club owner that told me, 'Play what you want. Play your music. Play what you record.'"

### **Changing Media and Demographics**

The advent of the Internet and the rise of computers put new tools in the hands of musicians for creativity, self-promotion, and production and distribution of original recordings. While Heine (2012) argues that a "vibrant music scene" includes a recording studio and a record

label (p. 203), now everyone could have a studio (Leyshon, 2009) and, with online distribution services available for a nominal fee, anyone could act as a record label (Brae, 2018).

Rock music scenes in other cities often have the support of a local rock radio station (Heine, 2012). In larger cities, local rock stations will dedicate weekly slots to the latest original music of up-and-coming local bands. They also sponsor events such as Battle-of-the-Bands contests where local groups will perform in front of an audience and a panel of judges made up of notable local DJs and successful local musicians. That was something that was sorely lacking in Laredo, but it never deterred local rock musicians. As new technologies emerged, this began to matter even less.

Aside from being a musician, Al Rubio has also made a career of working in local radio, which has had a kind of “touch-and-go” relationship with rock music. While there has always been an obvious interest in rock music in Laredo, radio stations that tried rock formats have never done well there in recent history. According to Rubio, people have always complained about the absence of a rock station in Laredo, “But you'd never have support for when anyone would try to change their programming more towards something like that. That station would always come in last in the ratings.”

The reason for this, as Rubio suggests, is very likely that rock music fans are already used to playing their preferred music on their own media (i.e., cassettes in the 1980s, compact discs, mp3 players, etc.). Thus, if they even know about a new rock station in town, they eventually revert to their tailored playlists on their personal media before long.

The truth is that radio stations are businesses, and the purpose of a business is to make money. Radio stations make their money on advertising sales, and advertisers just aren't willing to spend their dollars on a station, be it rock or any other format, that has poor ratings. Thus, he

asserts that radio stations in Laredo always stick to “tried and true” formats that attract the most listeners, which still favor Mexican/Spanish music. “Terrestrial radio started going downhill in favor of satellite radio and people having their own little thumb drives that they would plug into their cars or whatever for listening,” he said.

As streaming media services gained popularity in the 2010s, this trend grew even more for fans of rock music in Laredo. Streaming music services like Spotify and Pandora gave listeners a wide range of choices, giving them the power to create their own customized radio stations. This also gave local listeners access to new rock music that was never possible with the limited scope of local radio.

Mark Guerrero started playing in the Laredo music scene in the mid-1990s as a teenager in a band that played rock exclusively. For the last 20 years, he has led The Jolly Ranchers, a variety group that plays all genres of music and is one of the more successful bands in Laredo. “Technology has made it accessible for anybody around the world to hear anything,” he says. Jose Santacruz elaborated about how the streaming algorithms have helped him promote his own original music, “If you have somebody who's listening to radio rock on their streaming device and they're playing list runs out, or if they just push ‘random,’ well, you can just fast-forward through a song if you don't like it, but sometimes they're like, ‘oh I've never heard that group before,’ so you get introduced to a whole bunch of different people.”

The population of Laredo has grown steadily every decade since 1880, but the first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the city’s largest gain per decade as it increased by over 60,000 people (World Population Review, 2021). Many, if not most, of Laredo’s newest citizens were from Mexico. Texas saw the second largest increase in immigrant population per state between 2000 and 2010 (Camarota, 2011).

Laredo audiences are usually more reserved in their behavior at live music venues. They generally keep to themselves and their own friends and do not normally get up to dance at rock shows, as opposed to audiences in other parts of the United States and Mexico, who are more outgoing in their conduct. The reactions and interactions from Laredo's locals with entertainers are mostly limited to applause between songs. The influx of people from Mexico and places north of the border city in the early 2000s brought with it a different kind of audience that was more extroverted. Al Rubio recalled of that period, "you started getting a lot more audiences that were Spanish first, and they would approach the band to ask for requests or whatever. Those are folks that go out and they relish their moment to be entertained. So, you're starting to get a lot of audiences that would clap along, and sing along, and they'd actually get up and dance; a lot more audience participation as opposed to people who are more typically Laredo that were just kind of sitting there." "It's the technology that has made it available for everybody, and then more people coming into the country and more people coming into the city from other places," said Guerrero. Thus, more exposure to more rock music to a growing population resulted in more venues and more audiences.

One former local musician actually came to Laredo from a larger city with a bigger music scene. Andy Sanchez came to Laredo from Dallas to take part in the local rock scene. Coming to a smaller scene presented many opportunities for acquiring experience that would have been harder to get trying to break into a larger music market. "In Laredo, you know, we're going into the venues and doing all kinds of new stuff all the time and it's all with the same people. So, it's kind of like you grow as you learn and, you know, you just learned what's important." Music scenes in Larger cities are very competitive and often cliquish. In Laredo, it was easier for a

young and budding musician like Sanchez to get established, collaborate with more seasoned players, and gain valuable insight and experience.

Thus, the changes in Laredo's population not only brought more people who enjoyed rock music, but also more outgoing audiences that were less reserved in their enjoyment of the local nightlife. Rock music venues saw an increase not only in audiences but also the enthusiasm of the crowds. This only worked to generate more interest and attract even more people to enjoy their evenings listening to local rock bands in these establishments. It also attracted musicians from outside of Laredo who saw opportunity in a growing music scene whose participants were more open to welcoming new talent than those in larger cities.

### **Band Promotion in the Big Data Age**

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, rock bands in Laredo would often create and print flyers they would distribute to promote an upcoming show, as is common in other cities with active music scenes. Clubs and bars often had weekly newspaper and radio ads to promote food and drink specials, while also announcing which band would be performing on their stages that weekend. According to Raul Flores, these mediums could be costly. "It was very hard back then," he said, "The little money that you had was spent on advertising. Social media has made it easier for bands and venues to advertise and promote shows, and perhaps even reach more people. "You don't have to advertise anymore because everything's on Facebook," says Chale Castillo.

One of the problems with distributing flyers and paying for radio and newspaper ads was that not everyone would see the flyers, not everyone reads the newspaper, and not everyone will listen to a particular radio station where a business is advertising. Social media bridges that gap.



Chale Castillo elaborated on that point, “there’s no comparison between Facebook and social media, and newspaper and radio. Now, everyone’s online. Everyone has a smartphone.”

While there is no guarantee everyone in a specific location will see everything posted by fellow locals on social media, it still affords musicians, promoters, and venues an advertising advantage that is free of charge and will easily reach users who follow them. “There’s a sea of information. It’s hard for people to see your ad worldwide, but locally you can be very successful with it if you know how to promote it,” said Raul Flores, who also worked in radio for a time.

Carlos Imperial talked about how social media helps songwriters get their music heard by more people. “If you have a good recording or a video with good sound, you can put it out there, and you’re going to get a big response. It’s something that is free. It doesn’t take much time, really, to do it. You upload it and, before you know it, it’s out there. You can send it to your friends and hopefully your friends will send it to their friends. It’s not something that snowballs overnight, you know, but it’s accessible. Instead of ‘word of mouth,’ now it’s ‘word of link!’”

Social media has even helped Imperial reach people to attend his shows when he plays outside of Laredo. “We were playing at this place call Carousel Lounge in Austin and of course, they have other bands playing originals, it was our turn and we played. At the end of the night, we were talking to a few people. ‘You guys are from Laredo? We’re from Laredo too but we live over here!’ I asked, ‘how did you guys find out about us?’ ‘I saw you guys were coming from Laredo and we decided to come.’ I asked, ‘how’d you find us?’ They said, ‘we looked online for gigs in our area, and we found that you guys were here, so we came to see you.’ It’s like something unexpected, you know. Yeah, social media makes it accessible like that.”

Thus, we see Verboord and Noord’s (2016) findings reinforced with this story. Through social media, Imperial and his band were able to reach former Laredoans, who came to his show

in Austin because they had seen online that his band was from their former hometown; something that may not have been as easily achieved through the older traditional mediums of print and radio.

According to Jose Santacruz, social media has given bands playing shows locally an advertising advantage they would not otherwise have. “If 50 people actually show up because of an ad you did, you're already in good standing with a lot of clubs here in town. You've already filled up a third of that place, and the rest of their regulars come in, you know, you're going to have a pretty decent night”

The internet not only assists musicians with distributing their music and promoting their shows, but also as a learning tool. There is a veritable sea of websites providing instruction for the most advanced players and even for beginners. There is also no shortage of lessons on YouTube for those barely learning or looking to improve on their instruments. There are plenty of tutorials on how to play just about any song on just about any instrument. Some even feature the original artists demonstrating their techniques, like guitarist Alex Lifeson of the Canadian rock band, Rush, with his videos meant to help guitarists who wish to cover his bands greatest hits. (iVideosongs, 2018) “There are more good musicians now because of education,” said Chale Castillo, “There are videos on YouTube and people can learn how to play. All we had was the record player and we had to figure it out ourselves, but now people learn off of YouTube.”

Social media was utilized by many musicians and bands during the COVID19 pandemic to continue reaching their audiences via livestreamed performances on Facebook and other social media sites. Rick Castillo said, “we've seen a lot of cover bands, or local bands, that you catch here at bars and stuff, but now they can't so they'll go live. They'll do a little show from wherever they're doing it and people tune in and then watch them, which I think it's great.” Moni Godines

and his wife have a band called Little Sister, which has been a main staple on the Laredo rock scene since the late 1990s. “With Little Sister’s Facebook, when the pandemic started, we were able to do live shows for people to watch in the comfort of their homes. They were just basically concerts with me and her, and an acoustic guitar here in our study, and she really pushed to make that happen so that people can feel a little bit of normalcy in their life.” This illustrates David Beer’s assertion that social media networks “have caused a rapid and radical reconfiguration of the relations between well-known and little-known performers and their respective audiences” (Beer, 2006).

Thus, through social media, local rock musicians were able to continue reaching their audiences and keep the scene alive during a time when venues were inaccessible due to health and public safety concerns. None of the respondents mentioned a single negative aspect of using social media to promote themselves or their music. All of them noted that the best thing about it is that it is free, unlike radio and print.

## CONCLUSION

This research sought to learn how the rock music scene in Laredo, Texas developed through the eyes of the local musicians who have taken part in it, how the local culture changed to allow it to grow, and the role of social media and online music platforms in the propagation of rock music locally.

Based on the answers from my interview respondents, the rock music scene in Laredo was already happening in the mid-1960s. Venues in those years were not selective of what kind of music was played by the bands they hired. As the 1970s progressed, new music genres, such as Tejano music, made rock music less popular among local audiences, and musicians adapted by playing these genres instead of rock. The 1980s saw rock bands playing at private parties mostly, while venues that hired live bands favored Tejano music. Only two venues in Laredo hired rock or English-language pop cover bands, but adamantly refused to hire local talent. Unfortunately, I was unable to find the owners of these venues to ask them their reasons for rejecting hometown rock bands in their establishments. However, one of my interview respondents, Al Rubio, said that it was due to the ill repute of some local groups because of violence and crime that would take place at their self-organized shows. By 1990, bars and nightclubs slowly began hiring local rock groups again. There was a cultural shift in Laredo during this period, which was evidenced by the opening of an arts center and a performing arts high school in one of the public school districts. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more venues and rock bands, original and cover, appeared. The city saw its largest population growth per decade during this time, and technology provided new ways to create, distribute, and enjoy music. Social media made the chore of promoting bands and shows remarkably simple by connecting musicians and their audiences

directly. Bands were even able to remain in touch with their followers during the lockdowns of the COVID19 pandemic by livestreaming performances.

It was also discovered that ethnicity played no part in the waning of the Laredo rock scene during the 1980s. The reason why local rock bands could not easily find gigs was due to the popularity of other music genres, and the bad reputations garnered by rock bands due to undesirable events that occurred at their self-organized shows. There was already “moral panic” hysteria associated with rock music in the United States and these incidents only reinforced the subsequent perceptions of rock musicians as lawless miscreants, drunks, and drug addicts.

The resurgence of the rock scene in the 1990s, when the Tejano music craze was still at its height, denotes a certain resiliency in the rock musicians of Laredo. While the city’s night spots leaned toward music genres of Hispanic identity in the 1980s, the people did not abandon rock music. If they had, The Whistle Stop and The Import Lot would not have lasted as long as they did and local rock bands would not have continued through the decade in the underground scene they created, while striving to rejoin the mainstream nightlife, which they eventually accomplished. In fact, they took over as bars and clubs stopped looking to out of town rock music talent altogether and started hiring only local bands.

With the growth of the scene coinciding with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s and social media in the mid to late 2000s, they have been influential in its growth, especially in the last 10-15 years. They have most notably made a difference as promotional tools. Online media have taken the place of flyers and local media advertisement, as musicians and venues alike have free and open access to it. It is certainly a tool for promoting music, performances, and venues, and generating interest among potential patrons and fans. Local musicians expressed that social media has been instrumental to the development of Laredo’s rock scene in more recent years.

Another aspect in which the Internet and online platforms have been valuable is in helping newer generations of musicians learn to play and become proficient enough with their instruments to pursue music as a profession. The many free online resources available on YouTube and other websites have helped newer, younger musicians, who often cannot afford lessons or qualify to attend the local performing arts magnet school, not only master their instruments but has also made it possible for even the most seasoned players to learn cover songs with far greater accuracy than simply figuring them out by ear.

Education has also played a crucial role in the growth of the scene. It has had a direct effect on both the quantity and quality of the more recent generations of musicians in the city. It also brought forth a new generation of listeners who were more open to various styles of music and art. This, in turn, brought about more venue owners who were willing to take a chance hiring bands who played their own original music. That gamble has consistently worked out in favor of both these venues and the musicians who perform in them, as clubs like AJ's, The Rooftop Lounge, The Cold Brew, and others who hire original music bands have become some of the hottest night spots in the city.

It is important to note the role that growth and changes in the city's population have played. Laredo has grown steadily in population since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but saw its largest boom during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with most of the influx coming from Mexico. This not only meant more audiences, but also people who were much less introverted in their conduct while enjoying rock music at local night spots. People from Mexico, and those from other parts of the United States, are more outgoing and less reserved than Laredoans. This created a livelier atmosphere at local rock shows that made going to them more fun and interesting. This has also influenced the local populace to be more extroverted themselves and

interact more with performers and each other. Livelier crowds make an evening at a live rock show more entertaining for both the audiences and the performers. Thus, not only do more people want to go out to a live rock venue, but more musicians want to be part of the scene and enjoy the excitement of performing for an animated and receptive audience.

Kruse (2010) wrote that music is understood “in relation to local identity” (p. 628). Local identity in Laredo, Texas is defined by the dual nature of its culture. Being located on the U.S.-Mexico border, and a majority of its citizens having roots in Mexico either through heritage or origins, Mexican culture is prevalent in daily life. With a largely bilingual populace, who often speak Spanish and English interchangeably, an abundance of Spanish language media, a profusion of Mexican restaurants, and Mexican cultural traditions being commonplace, the line between what is inherently Mexican or American is blurred (Lozano, 2017, p. 36). The ensuing hybrid culture in this transnational space is unterritorial in nature. Mexican tourists who come here will often say that Laredo’s culture is not quite Mexican in character, while American tourists from cities to the north say that it is not quite American in character either. However, from the perspective of Laredo’s citizens, it is simply their culture. Thus, the music they choose to play and listen to is not an expression of something they are trying to be, but of who they are. As Mark Guerrero said in his interview, “I’m Hispanic, man. I’m Latino, bro, but I identified more with the rock music. The Beatles spoke to me more than the other music did.”

One of the things that makes Laredo unique is its culture, which is both Mexican and American while simultaneously being neither. It is an amalgamation which is expressed by identifying with that which is inherently Mexican while existing as an American border city. It is a true melting pot of ethnicity and culture that has evolved historically from the founding of the city as part of the Spanish province of Nuevo Santander in 1755, to being part of Mexico,

becoming part of the State of Texas and the United States of America in 1846, and growing into the largest inland port in the nation and the sprawling community it is today. It is a place where Mexican and American culture are not two separate things but are one. Its people express their identity as such through their international traditions, their art, and their music without any care as to whether its Mexican, American, or anything else because, in truth, it is their own. They have made it so, and that is one of the reasons why Laredo has earned its nickname, “The Gateway City.” Thus, this study of the rock music scene in Laredo, Texas has shed light on cultural fluidity and hybridity in a transnational and transcultural community.

It is interesting to note that after venues in the 1960s through the early 70s hired bands of all genres, Tejano music, which is known for blending Mexican music, American genres like rock, jazz, and country, and even adding elements of other Latin American genres like salsa and merengue, gained prominence not only in south Texas, but across the state. This reflects the cultural fluidity and hybridity of south Texas, and how musicians on the border have assimilated rock, and other music genres, to their culture.

Further study into the histories of music scenes in south Texas and the different genres they contain may discover how this sort of cultural fluidity and hybridity may have led to the rise of the Tejano music scene in Texas in the 1980s and 90s. Furthermore, other Latin music genres that infuse elements of Hip-Hop music, such as reggaeton, have risen to prominence. These music styles, like Tejano, blend Hispanic and American genres to create hybrid genres that are enjoyed by audiences in the United States and Latin America. Additional study may trace how these mixed genres originate and become popular across many countries.

More could be learned about the history of the local music scene in Laredo as a whole by finding and interviewing more local musicians of all genres and letting them tell their stories. It



would also be good to interview venue owners, managers, and promoters to learn of the development of the Laredo music scene from their point of view as businesspeople. This would lead to a better understanding of transnational and transcultural communities, how music scenes develop, how they influence the communities of which they are a part, and how tastes and preferences in music evolve as small communities expand and grow into larger communities, like Laredo did during the time period examined in this study.

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