

South Texas musician makes his own breaks

CORPUS CHRISTI (AP) — Esteban "Steve" Jordan is a frustrated man. For much of the past 20 years, he and his band, Rio Jordan, have been creating some of the most unusual and exciting music ever produced by Texans and yet few people — outside of South Texas' Hispanics — have heard his name or his music.

The music, as difficult to describe as it is easy to enjoy, is a unique blend of South Texas conjunto, jazz, blues and salsa that has earned Jordan the label of "the Jimi Hendrix of the accordion."

And now, in his 40th year of making music, a combination of events — the "breaks" the 48-year-old Jordan has always longed for — are finally happening.

David Byrne of New York's avant-garde musical group Talking Heads is featuring Jordan in a movie, "True Stories." Jordan will be seen playing the accordion and singing his autobiographical anthem "Soy de Tejas" ("I'm from Texas"). Byrne also used Jordan's accordion work on "Radio Head," a song from the group's next album. The movie and song will expose Jordan's sound to millions of new ears in the United States and Europe.

Earlier this year Jordan signed a three-year recording contract with RCA International. His second album with the label, "Turn Me Loose," has won critical acclaim although sales of the LP are low. Jordan, as he has done on many of his recordings, plays all the instruments on "Turn Me Loose" — drums, bass, guitar, percussion and accordion, as well as producing the album.

"There is something inside of Steve Jordan that wants to explode," says Miguel de la Higuera, vice president of RCA's Latin

Music U.S. division. "But now it's up to Steve. We have to wait for him."

A recent article in Down Beat magazine praised Jordan's music, saying he combines "a swaggering stage presence, an inexhaustible supply of energy, and an impassioned experimentalism to create one of America's most unique musical experiences."

News of Jordan's legendary talents is spreading quickly in music circles. In June, a crew from Britain's Channel 4 television filmed a live performance of Jordan and his band to be broadcast next year. A month later, he teamed with Jose Feliciano on a Budweiser radio jingle. And in a move that surely won't surprise his old friends, Jordan turned down an interview with MTV.

"It was simple, bro," Jordan says with characteristic jazz lingo spicing his talk. "They just wanted to interview me. But I want my first exposure on MTV to be my music, not me sitting around B.S.-ing with some person who doesn't know anything about my music."

Just a few moments after Steve Jordan's birth in the tiny Rio Grande Valley town of Elsa in 1938, a midwife unknowingly placed a few drops of contaminated eye solution in both eyes, causing permanent scarring. The accident left him blind in his right eye and partially blind in the other.

Born to migrant farmworker parents (who still live near Edinburg), Jordan grew up with 15 brothers and sisters. His handicap made learning difficult and he dropped out of school in the first grade. By then he was already singing and playing guitar, and he began frequenting cantinas along the migrant farmworker trail.

"I would play and sing, run errands, shine shoes, do just about anything for a nickel," he says. "That's the way it was back in those days. You did what you had to to survive, but I know I missed out on a lot. I never played marbles or baseball with my friends. Ever since I was 7, I've been hanging out with people who were a lot older than me."

In a Roswell, N.M., tavern in 1973, Jordan almost died when he was stabbed just below his right rib cage. It took almost two years of rest before he could play his accordion again, but he returned to the Chicano music world with a hit song in 1976.

"La Camelia" is one of Jordan's all-time classic ballads and it can still be found on many jukeboxes on Corpus Christi's West Side.

Steve Jordan's legacy of 33 albums and more than 100 singles leaves little room for argument that he is best accordionist in South Texas and possibly the world.

"I said it on my show last week: Steve Jordan is the greatest accordion player we've seen in our time, and that's no bull," declares Johnny Canales, host of the nationally syndicated Hispanic music TV program "The Johnny Canales Show."

Recording star Freddy Fender, who has been Jordan's friend since the early '60s, is one of his biggest supporters.

"There's nobody who can touch him," Fender says. "I truly believe that Steve is the most talented musician I've ever known. The problem is: How do you harness a talent that reaches into so many worlds ... that is so complex? Comparing what he's doing to what everybody else in the Valley is doing is like trying to compare Beethoven and Grandpa Jones."

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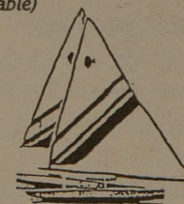
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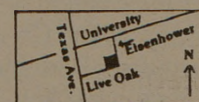
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