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# Los Tres Reyes



Mexican trío romántico from Texas

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# Los Tres Reyes

Three guitars and three voices; melodic three-part harmonies, passionate lyrics, guitar picking delivered with the precision of a master classical guitarist, and arguably the smoothest voices in the history of romantic Latin American music. This is the essence of Los Tres Reyes, The Three Kings - kings of the Mexican *trío romántico* genre of music.

Gilberto Puente, Raúl Puente and Bebo Cárdenas make up Los Tres Reyes, a Mexican *trío* that gained acclaim in the 1950's and 60's and is now experiencing a resurgence in international popularity. Currently based in San Antonio, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, they are "*el último de los grandes tríos*," the last of the great trios, because they are the only surviving *trío* from the golden age of Mexican cinema and the romantic music that served as its backdrop. Los Tres Reyes were younger contemporaries of *Trío Los Panchos*, Los Tres Aces, Los Diamantes and Los Tres Caballeros, household names to Latin American enthusiasts of *trío* music. In fact, brothers Gilberto and Raúl of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas originally started their *trío* in 1958 with Puerto Rican Hernando Avilés, former member of *Trío Los Panchos*, as *primera voz*, or high harmony and lead vocals. Over time several other *primeras voces* joined Los Tres Reyes, with the latest member Bebo Cárdenas of Cuba's Matanzas province accompanying them for the last eight years.

The romantic *trío* no doubt is a pan-Latin phenomenon with roots firmly in Mexico. "*Tríos* are a great Mexican tradition," claims Gilberto, although he credits Cuba for giving birth to the *bolero*, or romantic ballad, the staple of *trío* musical repertoire. Cuban *Trío Matamoros* popularized the *bolero* which made its way to Mexico through the southeastern state of Yucatan. In the Mexican urban movement of the 1930's and 40's, the *bolero* gained ground over rural *ranchero* music thanks to artists such as Agustín Lara, whom Gilberto accompanied on occasion late in Lara's life.

The Puente brothers were born as fraternal twins in the northeastern state of Nuevo León in 1936 during the height of this urban musical movement. Although they grew up in the seat of *Norteño* music, it was boleros and guitar to which they gravitated. Gilberto studied classical guitar full time and together the brothers' original climb to fame came while accompanying Texas border songbird Chelo Silva in the early 1950's. They moved to Mexico City in 1956 to accompany another female soloist, Puerto Rican Virginia Lopez, and it was there that they picked up the name Los Tres Reyes.

For 10 years they enjoyed international acclaim performing, recording and collaborating with Mexican luminaries such as Pedro Vargas, Lola Beltrán, Miguel Aceves Mejía and Marco Antonio Muñoz. Record sales of over 10 million copies earned them Golden Records status but still, changes in taste of popular music forced them to disband in 1966. They returned to Nuevo Laredo where Gilberto worked as a customs officer for twenty years, while Raúl continued to tour and perform.

Many years later in the early 1990's, the Puente brothers noticed that the old music of *Trío Los Panchos* was receiving considerable attention in Spain, some songs even becoming number one hits on the Spanish music charts. At the suggestion of a friend they quickly regrouped with *trío* veteran Johnny Albino on lead vocals and went on to record more albums (a total of 18 to date) and accompany more artists such as Selena, Vicky Carr, Linda Ronstadt and Shakira. The latest phase of Los Tres Reyes is marked by the inclusion of Bebo Cárdenas on lead vocals, whom they met in a Puerto Rican concert

in 2004. Cárdenas, age 54, quickly adapted to the Puente brothers and is grateful to be "catching the last train in *trío* musical history."

Now Los Tres Reyes are more active than ever. At the age of 75 the Puente brothers handle a grueling tour and practice schedule with the energy and enthusiasm of their early musical years. 2012 summer and fall concert stops include Miami, San Antonio, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala and Ecuador. Musically they continue to be at their best. With Gilberto providing all musical arrangements, Los Tres Reyes continuously search for new songs to record; this year they released a Smithsonian Folkways album, "Romancing the Past," and their repertoire and style continues to expand. In addition to boleros, their music includes Cuban *guarachas*, Colombian *cumbias*, Ecuadorian *pasillas*, Peruvian waltzes, Venezuelan *joropos* and of course, Mexican *rancheras*.

A lasting feature of the Tres Reyes legacy is their extremely high standard in music. They are best known for Gilberto's *requinto* guitar style and their uniquely blended vocals, which the brothers attribute to a lifetime performing together. Gilberto is considered one of the best *requinto* players in the world, garnering numerous awards and tributes, including a Gilberto Puente Guitar Festival in Salamanca, Spain. His original *requinto* guitar design is imitated by luthiers worldwide. Lyrically, Los Tres Reyes are extremely selective of the songs they record and perform, always choosing the themes of love, women and romance. They carefully interpret words and meticulously execute pronunciation, placement of accents, and dynamics. The result is nothing short of breathtaking. As Cárdenas explains, "*trío* is a whisper, an intimacy."

Los Tres Reyes continue to have tremendous appeal throughout Latin America and Latino communities in the U.S., particularly in Miami and Los Angeles. In keeping with their legacy, the Puentes want to ensure that *trío* music instruction continues for future generations. For now, however, they feel extremely lucky and happy to be able to share their work with a public that still clamors for this style of romantic music. If you have the opportunity to catch this last train of great *trío* music, consider yourself lucky as well; sit back and enjoy the smooth, delightful, harmonious ride.

Cristina Ballí, Executive Director  
Texas Folklife, Austin Texas

## Bibliography

- García Corona, León Felipe and Sheehy, Daniel E., Los Tres Reyes; Romancing the Past album liner notes (2011, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings).  
Ballí, Cristina (2012, Texas Folklife, unpublished, transcribed interview recorded on August 6, 2012).

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

