

“Ven Connigo”--Selena (1990)

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Essay by Joe Nick Patoski (guest post)*



Selena

To fully appreciate Selena, the superstar Tejano singer, start with “Ven Connigo,” the second album that Selena y Los Dinos recorded for their new major label EMI-Latin. Released in 1990, the record was a watershed for the family band from Corpus Christi, serving notice these were the new standard bearers of *Tejano*, the regional music popular among second- and third-generation Texans of Mexican descent.

The big band ensemble sound dated back to the 1940s, and was built on the polka as its primary rhythm, as Texas Mexicans in the early 20th century borrowed the European dance tradition from Czech and Germans immigrants to Texas and reworked it into their own unique style.

Tejano had its own living legend, Little Joe Hernandez of Little Joe y La Familia, but the music’s popularity had remained insular until a wave of younger musicians appeared primed to reach a wider audience. Major record labels including EMI had taken notice and were betting on the crossover potential of Emilio Navaira, La Mafia, and Grupo Mazz, as well as Selena.

The songs on “Ven Connigo” illustrate the evolution of the Quintanilla kids over nine years under the direction of their father-manager Abraham Jr., who had once sung street corner harmonies in his own version of Los Dinos in the early 1960s. Frustrated over his original group’s inability to crossover into the mainstream and perform for Anglo audiences, Abraham taught his English-speaking children to play the bouncy Tejano rhythm and how to sing in Spanish.

They began as a small combo that played Papa Gayo’s, the family’s Mexican restaurant in Lake Jackson, when Selena was in elementary school. Years of playing every weekend on the road polished the act into a state of the art performing enterprise complete with recording studio and touring busses. Joining Selena’s older brother and producer-composer, A.B. III, and drumming sister, Suzette, onstage was a full ensemble that included longtime colleague Dino Ricky Vela on

keyboardist, and from Laredo, second keyboardist Joe Ojeda and Pete Astudillo, a singer-songwriter-dancer who co-produced with A.B. At the center of it all was 20-year-old Selena.

The head-and-shoulder profile photograph of Selena looking down, pensive, on the album cover, speaks volumes. The perky teen who came of age at Tejano Music Awards shows in San Antonio had grown into a woman in full flower, of exceptional natural beauty, comfortable in her brown skin, her jet-black hair cut stylishly short.

Most songs on the album are either straight up Tejano, distinguished by gliding, danceable rhythm with keyboards and synthesizers playing the parts of accordion and horns for a more modern sound, or romantic ballads, showcasing Selena's soaring vocals.

That strange, weird polka groove drives the title track, with David Lee Garza's accordion added for old school street cred, and distinguishes "Yo Te Amo," a duet Selena sings with Pete Astudillo on a song he cowrote. The updated *polkita* rhythm also defines "La Tracalera," a much-improved redo of her 1982 version of the Tex-Mex truckers' anthem complete with shout outs to San Antonio, Laredo, Houston, Dallas, Waco, Victoria, Corpus Christi, and La Feria.

"La Tracalera," "Aunque No Salga Sol" and "Despues de Enero," a ballad showcasing Selena's vocal range, were compositions written by Johnny Herrera, the Corpus Christi mentor of Selena's father-manager. Herrera had several records of his own that were hits in Mexico in the 1950s where he was known as "El Suspiro"--the Sigh.

Three songs on "Ven Conmigo" offer hints where Selena was headed.

The seventh track and second single, "Baila Esta Cumbia," completely strayed from the Tejano formula. The song was a cumbia, not a polka. This AB3/Astudillo production borrowed heavily from Fito Olivares, the Cumbia King from the Texas-Mexico borderlands. Powered by a pounding, mesmerizing beat tailored for dancing, the song hit big in Mexico, something few Tejano bands had been able to accomplish, their music dismissed as not *puro* Mexican enough. Selena was opening doors.

"Enamorada de Ti," a percussive made-for-dance collaboration between AB Quintanilla and Pete Astudillo, features a rap break with a growling, assertive Selena busting rhymes, showing what she's got.

Along with "No Quiero Saber," the Quintanilla-Astudillo production team was making a strong case that they could create the English language crossover songs that the label executives ultimately wanted when they signed Selena.

"Ven Conmigo" froze all that in time.

Weeks after the album's release, guitarist Chris Perez joined Los Dinos, adding a rock component to the band's sound. Two years later, he and Selena married.

With “Ven Conmigo,” Selena was ascendant, earning comparisons to Gloria Estefan and to Madonna. She was signed to endorse Coca-Cola, the first *tejana* to do so.

Yet to come were concerts that filled Houston’s Astrodome with 60,000 fans, street dances at Miami’s Calle Ocho that turned on the larger Latin music world to this new singer coming out of Texas, a movie with Johnny Depp, and a role in a Mexican *telenovela*.

Each album that followed topped the previous one, capped by 1994’s fully-formed *Amor Prohibido*, the second album by a Tejano artist to sell more than 500,000 units.

The success of “Ven Conmigo” attracted the attention of Yolanda Saldivar, a San Antonio nurse who asked to run Selena’s fan club. Yolanda became so close to Selena, she became her business associate, managing her Selena, Etc. boutique in San Antonio and assisting Selena as she developed her fashion line with designer Martin Gomez.

Selena’s much anticipated crossover to the English language pop market would finally come--under tragic circumstances. On the morning of March 31, 1995, Selena was shot to death at a Corpus Christi motel. The shooter was Yolanda Saldivar, her fan club president, business associate and friend. Saldivar had been confronted by Abraham Quintanilla and Suzette Quintanilla for embezzling funds from the fan club and Selena’s boutique. For several weeks, Selena refused to believe Yolanda would steal from her. The morning of her death, Selena had finally realized what her father and sister had been saying was true. In an act of impulse and selfishness, Yolanda pulled out a pistol as they verbally argued, and their fates were sealed. Saldivar has spent the rest her life in prison. More than 25 years after her life ended, Selena’s legacy glows brighter than ever.

Joe Nick Patoski has been writing about Texas and Texans for five decades. He has authored and co-authored biographies of Willie Nelson, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Selena, and the Dallas Cowboys. His previous book was “Austin to ATX: The Hippies, Pickers, Slackers & Geeks Who Transformed the Capital of Texas,” published in 2019. His new book is “The Ballad of Robert Ealey and his Five Careless Lovers.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not represent the views of the Library of Congress.