



The Story So Far

Centuries. That's how much collective experience the veterans of Austin's vaunted music scene share. Not only have they lived history, they've made it. In this series, we explore what it's like to stand in the shoes of folks like ...

Ruben Ramos

BY JOHN T. DAVIS

RUBEN RAMOS, BETTER KNOWN TO HIS FANS AS THE SHARP-DRESSING "EL GATO NEGRO," is heir to a family musical tradition that goes back more than 80 years. His nine uncles all performed in the Los Serenateros big band orquesta between 1919 and 1941. Growing up in a family of migrant farmworkers based in Sugar Land, young Ruben saw music as a route out of the fields. He began sitting in with his brother Alfonso's band, but only committed to music full time in 1973, when he left a day job with the state to helm his band, the Mexican Revolution, full-time. When La Onda Tejana (the Tejana wave) exploded in Texas in the '90s, Ramos became one of the most identifiable and popular stars of the genre. In 1999, he shared a Grammy Award as part of the *Los Super Seven* album project. His latest album, *Viva La Revolución!*, earned him a Grammy this year.

"In 1968, I received a degree in computer programming and then went to work for the state Board of Insurance. But I think if I would have stayed there, I would have died. I already had three bleeding ulcers. I was drinking too much coffee and smoking two-and-a-half packs of Marlboros a day. That's when I decided I don't need this. And I loved music, you know?"

And music was all around him. "My uncle—he had a 13-piece big band, an orquesta—

did the swing and Big Band stuff," Ramos recalls. "By then, I was almost 16, and I started tagging along and sitting in on drums. They started getting popular, and I liked it. I liked the music. And the girls."

It was the late '50s, and Elvis, Little Richard and Chuck Berry were rearranging the musical cosmos. Suddenly, the polkas and waltzes that Ruben and his uncles were churning out at the *bailes grandes* sounded downright antique.

"By the time I was in 11th grade, I had black friends, white friends, Mexican friends. And we were listening to

rock 'n' roll. I'd invite my friends to come see us play, and they'd say, 'No, 'cause you all don't sing in English.'

"I'd tell my brother Alfonso, why don't you sing some English songs so my friends can come and see us? And my brother said, 'Well, you sing them.'

"Fats Domino had just come out with 'Blueberry Hill' and I really liked it. So that was my first rock 'n' roll song. People liked it, and we started getting a young crowd. We were packing the ballrooms.

"In the beginning you're playing just to get up there and meet the girls. But now I'm more interested in doing the music right and making it sound good and as well-rehearsed and professional as we can."

Ramos and band picked up the Best Tejano Album Grammy this year. When he went to the ceremony previously, as a member of the Los Super Seven ensemble, along with members of Los Lobos and award-winning accordionist Flaco Jimenez, he was just another star-struck tourist.

"That was pretty special, for Los Super Seven. When we got to the red carpet, some of us stepped aside instead of going inside. I did, because I wanted to see who was coming up behind us! Flaco went to the bar. He had four Grammys already, so he said what the hell.

"But this is *our* Grammy—it's very special to me. We're due."