

Border Radio's Powerful Influence

In the early 1930s Border Radio Stations became a prominent and powerful factor in the world of radio. Border Radio Stations sprang up on Mexico's northern border in the early 1930s and flourished for half a century. High-powered radio transmitters on Mexican soil, beyond the reach of U.S. regulators, blanketed North America with unique programming.

Mexico welcomed Border Radio Operators because Canada and the United States had divided the long-range radio stations between themselves, leaving none to Mexico. In the early days of radio, stations in the US broadcast at 50 to 500 watts, however Border Radio power generally ranged from 50,000 to 500,000 watts. These more powerful Border Radio Stations had a farther reach than stations based in the USA or Canada. Sometimes listeners claimed to hear broadcasts without a radio, receiving the powerful Border Radio signal on dental work, bedsprings, and barbed wire. American network programs were often lost when a Mexican border station was broadcasting near an American station's frequency.



Lydia Mendoza
Photo: Allee Wallace /UT Institute of Texas Cultures

Two of the biggest musical artists on Border Radio Stations were Lydia Mendoza and Maybelle Carter. Because of the ability to project Border Music such great distances, and because of the talent of these women, their music was heard and enjoyed by listeners across the United States. Lydia Mendoza was known as "The Meadowlark of the Border" and is also thought of as the mother of Tejano Music. Radio was one of the most powerful ways of spreading music across the borderlands in the 1930s, and it brought Mendoza's songs to people who had never heard her before. Latin people who had immigrated to the United States were enchanted by Lydia's music. Her music career was launched by Border Radio and spanned over 50 years.

Maybelle Carter was an American Country Musician and is best known as a member of the original Carter Family, whose descendants are still making music today. In the late 1930s to early 1940s, the Carter family was contracted to sing live and record music to be played on Border Radio. This era of performing live and recording for border stations was a major force in establishing the group's widespread popularity.

In 1986 the Mexican government made an agreement with the United States that allowed both Mexican and American broadcasters to use the other country's clear-channel frequencies for low-powered stations in the evening. That meant that the signals of the border stations would be drowned out in many communities by local broadcasts. This agreement effectively ended the era of Border Radio.