Mariachi music, dying in Mexico, alive in Gwinnett

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If you want to hear authen-
tic mariachi music, don't go to
Mexico.

While gaining popularity
here in United States, the pas-
sionate, string-driven music is
waning in its birthplace, re-
placed by American music and
other Latin grooves.

"It's ironic, but you go to
Mexico, and mariachi is al-
most dead," said Yamil Yunes,
who brings his award-winning
band, Mariachi Roma, to the
Children's Arts Museum at the
Hudgens Center at 11 a.m.
Saturday.

Yunes and his band of 18
high school students from Ro-na, Texas, a town just min-
utes away from the Mexican
border, won a competition last
November in San Antonio.

The prize was a free trip to
Atlanta.

The band is scheduled to
arrive in the city today and
will perform at several venues,
including the Rialto Theatre
for a Saturday night concert.

The practice has paid off for
Yunes' mariachi band. Many
schools in Texas have begun
incorporating mariachi, he
said, but only as an after-
school program. At Roma, it's
been incorporated into the
curriculum as a credit-

receiving elective, and Roma
is the only school to have
hired a director and an asis-
tant director, Yunes said.

"As a consequence, the pro-
gram has really flourished," said Yunes. "I think we have set a standard here. This is
not a regular mariachi band
that you would hear in a res-

taurant, with loud music and
an auto-tuned violin. This is
more like an orchestra. It's
very impressive. These kids
play so well that they burn the
house down."

Originating more than 100
years ago, mariachi music us-
es strings, including violins
and harps, horn sections and
sophisticated arrangements.
The traditional mariachi mu-

sic played by Roma is often
inspired by passionate love,
patriotism or a particular
ranch or countryside, said Xo-
chitl Mora, senior account ex-
decutive with Munoz Public
Relations, which represents
Ford Motor Co. For the sev-
enth consecutive year, the au-
tomaker sponsored the No-

vember mariachi competition
in San Antonio.

Mora, a Mexican, sees Lat-
in American music growing in
the United States because of
the influx of Hispanics. In
Gwinnett County, the Hispanic
population from 1990 to
2000 has swelled from 9,000
to more than 64,000, a 657 per-
cent increase, according to
census figures.

The growth has led to a
cross-cultural experience
across the country, Mora said,
with many cities, like San An-
tonio, playing mariachi music
to celebrate at city events.

"The general market is be-
coming more aware of Latin
American music. It is becom-
ing more popular," said Mora.

"The charm lies in the fact
that it is a very feisty type of
music, very passionate, so
when people listen they can't
help but tap their foot or feel
the emotion of the song."

Admission for the show at
the Hudgens Center at 6400
Sugarloaf Parkway is $5. For
more information, call 770-
623-6002.

Mayra Guerra is a member of Mariachi Roma, a band of
high school students from Roma, Texas, who will play at
the Hudgens Center for the Arts Saturday.