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XL Cover Story: Mariachi without borders

From grade schools to colleges, Central Texans put a fresh face on the Mexican ensembles

By Josefina Villicaña
Jan. 13, 2005

Lyrics pregnant with melancholy arouse memories of a forlorn and unrequited romance. Pulsating heart, recalling the golden era of Mexican cinema or accompanying the bride as a father leads her down the aisle. Profound melodies define patriotic Mexican festivities and mark each change in a family life.

For grandparents, mariachis are reminders of youth and the Sunday ritual of courting the object of their affection in the plaza of their towns, serenading the loved one with a group of mariachis. Parents remember the music that filled the church the day of their wedding or when they baptized their firstborn.

But what about the next generation? Who will preserve and celebrate this profoundly Mexican tradition?

Look to the young. And look not to Mexico, but to Texas. The state counts about 250 programs that teach mariachi in schools, from elementary through the college level. Bedichek Middle School is home to one of the youngest conjunto ensembles in the area.

"I have between 12 and 16 students each year, including brothers and sisters," says Michael Werst, director of the Bedichek mariachi band.

Universities, especially in the Southwest, also aim to inject new life into a basically nostalgic heritage. Béhague, ethnomusicologist at the University of Texas, says UT formed its first mariachi 25 years ago. Other universities that can't claim decades of experience are catching on as well. St. Edward's University has dedicated and talented students who are making a name for their school performing in community events and participating in national mariachi contests. Although this mariachi band was formed less than a year ago, it joined San Antonio's 10th Annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza in December.

No longer the province of Mexican and Tex-Mex restaurants, mariachi is a music whose time has come. It could be argued that musicians and teachers in Texas and the rest of the United States are driving the mariachi.



Photo by Ralph Barrera/AA-S

St. Edward's University's mariachi group was started by motivated students.

The crib of mariachi

It's indisputable that these regional sounds originated in Jalisco -- "the crib of mariachi," as it is in Mexico. Perhaps it's no coincidence that it's the same area where tequila was born. That fiery c associated with mariachi music and is often raised in toasts as the sounds of corridos flavor the a

Not so clear, however, is the origin of this controversial word, as musicologists and folklorists con "mariachi" was formed.

"There are various myths. One theory says that it originated from a particular kind of indigenous tree," said Lorenzo Candelaria, professor at UT's School of Music. Another explanation suggests that the word sprouted during the 19th century, when French emperor Maximilian ruled Mexico, and that it comes from the French "mariage," which means marriage, because these conjuntos were the typical entertainment at weddings.

But this long-held belief was discredited by the discovery of a document predating the French presence in Mexico that refers to the musical groups as "mariachis."

Another common misconception, according to Candelaria, is that the word is a diminutive of the name "Maria." An authoritative explanation doesn't exist.

What isn't argued is that this style of music sprouted in a humble region where peasants dressed and huaraches (sandals) in the 19th century.

Modern mariachis include as their essential instruments guitars, trumpets, vihuelas (a smaller ver violins and guitarrons (a larger version of the vihuela that eventually replaced the harp and has s

Old songs -- such as "Son Jaliscience" from Cocula in Jalisco -- dominate the repertoire. One of th known selections is the complexly rhythmic "La Negra." (Virtually all mariachi bands can play the:

Other regions besides the mariachi home base of Jalisco developed different "sons" (songs) that e associated with their place of origin, such as the "Son Huapango," "Son Huasteco" and "Son Jaroc tapatío," literally a sweet mixed drink from Jalisco, is a potpourri of different styles of songs, dep

Once the sounds emerge from a mariachi band, but before having seen performers, the mind con images: the outfit of a classic charro, which includes an enormous round sombrero and a two-pie black, decorated with silver buttons and embroidery (although in current times outfits are found i

When it comes to mariachi ensembles, El Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán -- which plays Bass Conce considered a favorite. Founded by Gaspar Vargas in 1898, this mariachi was invited to play when Cárdenas entered office in 1934, which transformed the group into the public's darlings. Years lat out as the ideal for younger students eager to emulate them.

They are "without a doubt the best," says Mónica Saldívar, a 19-year-old student at St. Edward's.

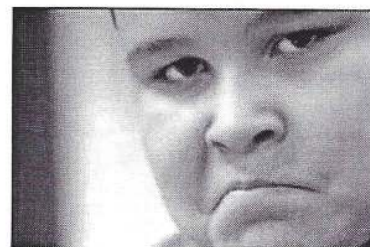
Developing the talent

The preservation and further evolution of Mexican music in this country marched hand in hand with a revival of Latino cultural and political identity.

"The movement to revive mariachis began during the '70s and '80s," says José R. Torres, music professor at the University of Texas in San Antonio. The sound is, naturally, popular with Latinos. "Parents want their children to connect to their heritage."

iViva el Mariachí! Mariachi V
When: 7:30 p.m. March 5; tick
13
Where: Bass Concert Hall
Tickets: \$20-\$100
Information: 477-6060, www

Mariachi Vargas, a 13-member (Mexico City, is widely considere mariachi in the world (and at m old, one of the most established toured with Linda Ronstadt and to Latin superstar Luis Miguel's traditional ballads, 'Mexico en la first Austin performance.



One reason this music has remained in the consciousness of the culture has been because of the conferences that offer workshops and healthy competitions. (In many countries, the health of folk music is fostered as much by academics as it is by the folk itself.)

The contests foster young talent and allow eager students to learn directly from professionals in the field. Besides offering the opportunity to interact with thousands of others who share the same passion for mariachi music, students can refine their skills by participating in specific workshops that deal with topics ranging from better ways to interpret classic pieces to refining playing methods.

Yet there is a drawback in the explosive popularity in mariachi conferences: the lack of intimacy and in-depth instruction possible with smaller groups. "There are workshops so popular that I've seen students spill outside the door," says Candelaria.

Annual conferences occur in cities such as Tucson, Ariz., and Albuquerque, N.M., and in states including Washington and Illinois. Of course, San Antonio, where some of these conferences originated, hasn't fallen behind.

"We host the largest competition of school mariachis in the United States, with over 50 ensembles participating," said Cynthia Muñoz, from Muñoz Public Relations, who organized the Mariachi Extravaganza in December. "The mariachi who wins the contest has the honor to open for Mariachi Vargas" in the final night concert, Muñoz added.

Student ensembles

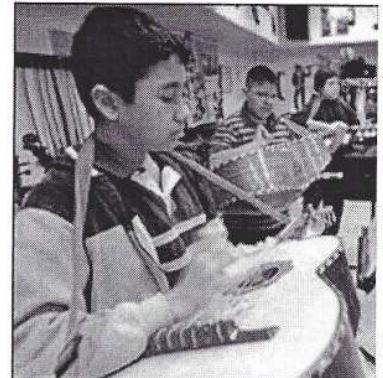
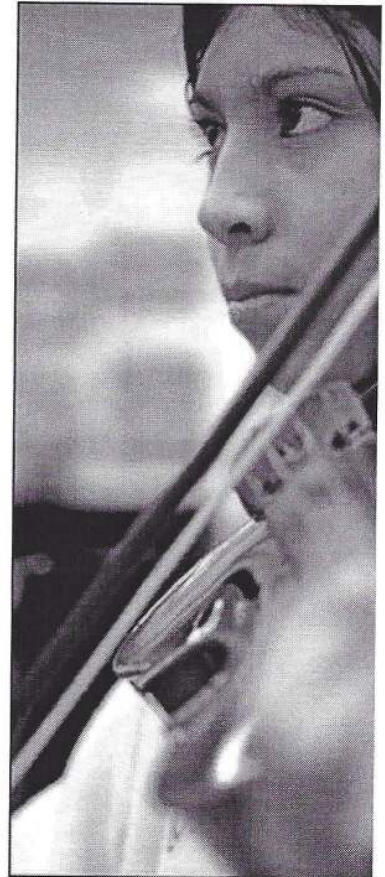
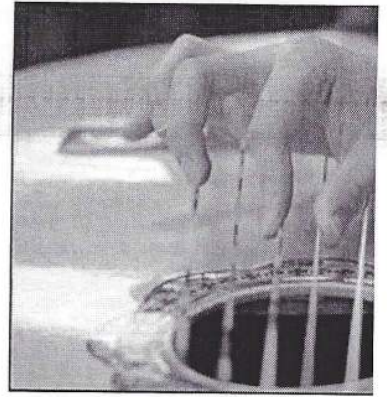
In Texas, mariachis and student programs have coexisted for many decades. "We formed the first mariachi in 1976, and in 1977 we had our first performance," Béhague says of UT's group. This ensemble attracts students who had the opportunity to practice this style of music in junior or high school, and want to continue developing.

"It's a dynamic group. Most of them are majoring in different fields" that in some cases are not associated with music, Béhague says. In honor of Américo Paredes, the great folklorist and one of the founders of the group, this mariachi is named Mariachi Paredes de Tejastitlán.

Not far away at St. Edward's, a group of students gathers two or three times a week to refine their technique. This mariachi started because a few students who had previous experience with mariachi music pushed the idea. Anita Ramos, from Eagle Pass, discovered an ardor for mariachi music two years ago. "She was a key player in the creation of the mariachi," said Linda Valdez, counselor for the St. Edward's University Mariachi.

"I like to spend time with others who share my passion," Ramos says. "Some of the students say: 'I want to play, but I only know how to play the violin because I was in band since junior high.' "

Universities, particularly in the Southwest, have granted this music the respect it deserves. In fact, they gave mariachi



Photos by Brian K. Diggs

lovers in Mexico the idea to begin conferences with workshops.

At Bedichek Middle School, the tradition passed down to young Austinites. From students from last year: Carlos Emmo Rangel, guitarron; Viridiana Castro, violin again.

Texas State University in San Marcos, whose band recently toured Scotland, is preparing to implement a certification for those who want to teach mariachi music.

"The certification is not necessary for someone to teach mariachi music, but it will enhance their skills," Lucy Bloor, academic counselor at the Texas State School of Music. Muñoz estimates that some 100 are registered in mariachi programs in Texas alone.

Inspired by another era

Perhaps some Mexican icons have helped elevate and popularize the image of the mariachi. Roles like those of Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete and Javier Solís during the golden age of Mexican cinema, at times by José Alfredo Jiménez, Antonio Aguilar and Lola Beltrán have contributed to their mystique. When names are evoked, they are as familiar to those with Mexican or Latino heritage as Frank Sinatra was to those who grew up in the United States.

In Mexico, mariachi reached its peak popularity in the '50s and '60s. Since then, it has become a very few new pieces composed (or at least popularized at the same universal level of recognition from its older era have). What is familiar to most is the repertoire that was played and popularized. Some of the songs are interpreted by vocalists who belong to a new generation, vocalists such as Fernández, Pepe Aguilar and Lucero. Some of the students who admire these singers relate to the relate to their parents' idols, and it's what brings them to mariachi music.

Professional mariachis work for the pleasure of the clients and, be it at restaurants or plazas filled with their best interest to be well-versed in the classics. Although not all the students who take on mariachi school or later at the university level plan to build a career out of it, like the professionals, they have a repertoire with sones, polkas, waltzes, boleros and rancheras.

Contagious conjuntos

"I would love to see students get involved with the chorus and orchestra programs in their school. He sees mariachi music as a final step, so that students in high school who have been practicing the basics can add this specialty.

"When I was in school I learned mariachi music after school from individuals who played this music," Candelaria says. Although he recognized the value that a professional can contribute to students, he mentors students in cooperation with music teachers, and once students have learned the basics.

"I fear that the limited funds in the school system (encourage) teaching mariachi music as an alternative orchestra, and not in addition to," Candelaria says.

Despite academic demands and jobs that some students must maintain in addition to their school, they give up their passion for mariachi music. "It amazes me to see how dedicated they are. They invest themselves, of their energy and their time," Valdez says.

"Mariachi music is different from any other music," said Freddy Azura, a vocalist who also plays guitar. Edward's. "I like to sing songs that people recognize everywhere."

One of his rewards is knowing he's keeping his culture strong and alive.

"It makes me feel great knowing that we are maintaining a tradition," Azura says. Another reward is the recognition from the public, and the acknowledgement that they continue to stay connected to their heritage.

"They are not willing to let go of their roots," Valdez says, "and that level of dedication astounds me."

One tradition that leaves lasting memories is arriving before the sun rises to awaken an unsuspecting girl with the impressive sound of "Las Mañanitas" -- the early-morning song of birthdays and saints.

ensemble of fully costumed mariachis.

Mariachis transform common celebrations into unforgettable memories. Many say the revival that United States has given new life to mariachi music in Mexico and the rest of the world. The reality allow everyone to celebrate life with more gusto.

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