

*'To injure no man,  
but to bless all mankind'*

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**Homefront** *With gusto and  
guitarróns, young Mexican-Americans  
embrace mariachi music and make it a  
surprise hit north of the border.*

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75¢

A GUIDE TO  
HOME, FAMILY  
AND COMMUNITY

# Home front

## Turning tumultuous transitions to tidiness

*Susan Teshu helps people manage the paperwork of life changes – sometimes by stowing it in the freezer.*  
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## Chicken soup spooned up as an edible heirloom

*One grandmother's recipes offer carrots and comfort, and a taste of the past.*  
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### Neighbor to Neighbor

— By Judy Lowe —

## It's better to give – but how?

You'd think it would be easy to give away things you don't want or need, but that's not necessarily so.

I'm sitting here looking at two glass pitchers that I no longer have room for. Neither has sentimental attachments, so this would be a good opportunity to find them a new home.

But where?

Goodwill doesn't pick up donations, and it's difficult for me to take my things to them. The Salvation Army accepts only clothes and furniture. That excludes pitchers – and crystal goblets, brass sconces, vases, garden tools, assorted knick-knacks, and a waffle iron.

So I seem to have four choices: Find a charity that can use my castoffs, locate individuals who want them, wait until spring and give up some weekends to take the things to a suburban flea market, or toss them out.

The usual solution – a garage sale – isn't easy when you live in an 1880s urban row house. (No yard, no garage, not even a driveway.)

I have been toying with the idea of offering some things on eBay, the online auction site, but my experience with selling a dozen books through Amazon.com has shown me the pitfalls. You have to agree to mail the books quickly once they're sold, and you must come up with shipping boxes that are the right size. (No problem at first; not so easy after the seventh volume.)

Also, the items have to be worth more than the postage and aggravation it takes to get rid of them.

The simplest solution would be the trash can. But then my conscience whispers that "Waste not, want not" admonition that's been drilled into me since childhood.

Surely there's a solution that's mutually beneficial to me and others. I hope I find it soon.

■ E-mail the Homefront at [home@csps.com](mailto:home@csps.com).



J. MICHAEL SHORT/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

**MUSIC FROM THE HEART:** Fernando Moguel of Houston is one of many young Mexican-Americans who are fascinated with mariachi. He won an award at the Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza in San Antonio recently.

# OLD MUSIC finds NEW VOICES

Mexico's traditional mariachi music is a hit again – with Hispanic youngsters in the US. It connects them to their roots.

By Kris Axtman

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

SAN ANTONIO – Virginia Stille can't decide on the right shade of lipstick. She doesn't want anything too garish, but the color must be bright enough to show up on stage.

"What about this one, Mom?" she calls from the makeup artist's chair.

Mom approves, and the stick of burnt sienna sweeps her lips. Just as she's about to surrender the chair, one of the stylists asks for a sample of her upcoming performance.

Now, that's something Virginia is not indecisive about.

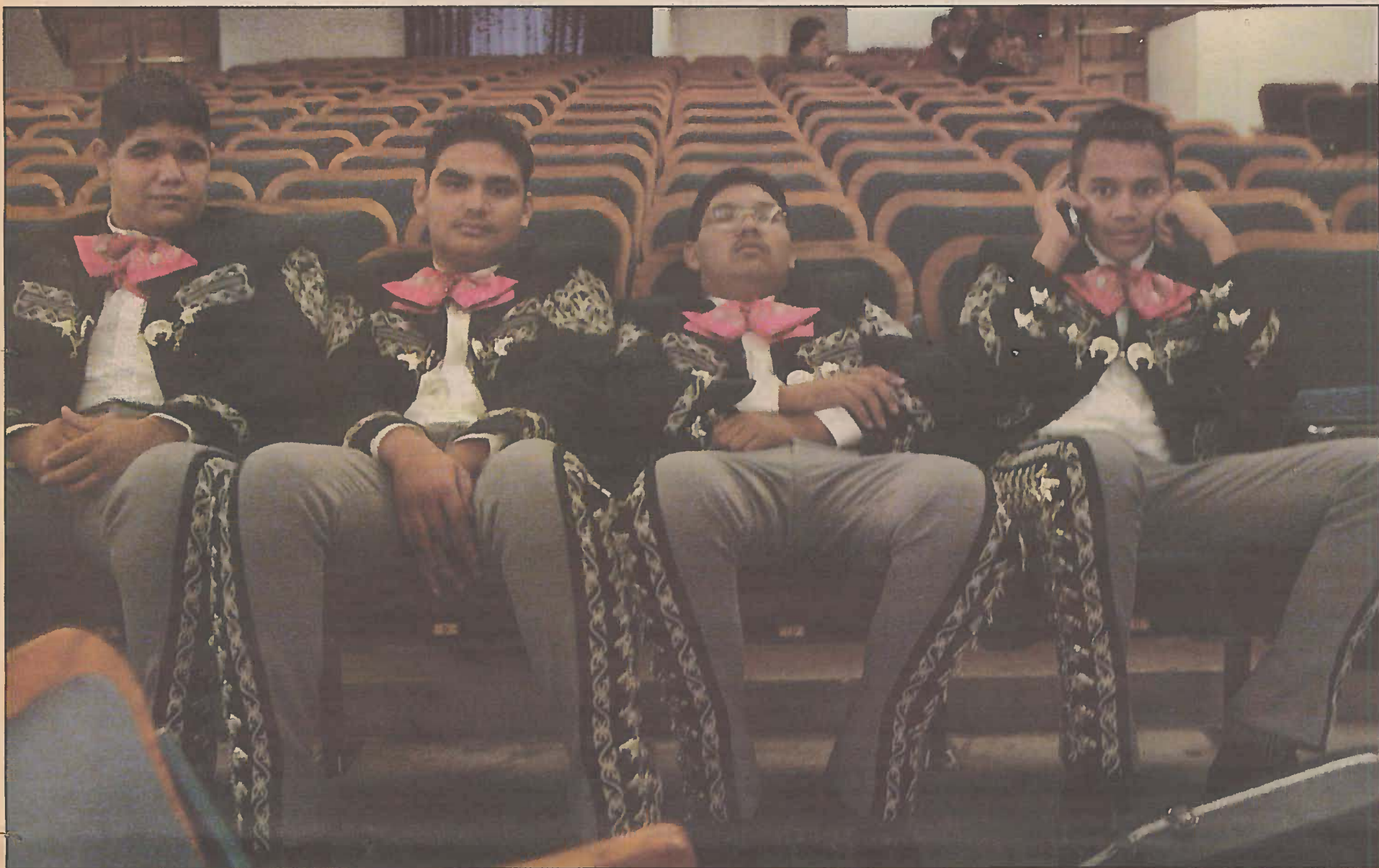
She begins slowly: "Rebozo, Rebozos," and then she builds: "de Santa María." Her voice is sophisticated for such a young girl, and she doesn't falter in the a cappella version of "Aires del Mayab," a tribute to the Mayan Indian culture.

At 13 years old, Virginia has just won best of show at the seventh annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza in San Antonio, a town that knows its mariachi music.

She competed against hundreds of young people to win the title and is now preparing for an evening concert.

"I hope to keep on singing and one day do it professionally," Virginia says, smoothing her delicately embroidered dress. "I want to make it big."

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PHOTOS BY J. MICHAEL SHORT/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

**ALL DRESSED UP:** At San Antonio's Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza, members of Mariachi Nuevo Santander from Roma, Texas, (above) wear traditional costumes, which feature waist-length jackets and fitted pants adorned with fancy embroidery and oversized silver buttons. Below, Virginia Stille of Houston sings her way to a best-of-show award.

## Mariachi makes a comeback

**MARIACHI** from page 11

Make it big singing mariachi? On this side of the border?

While it may be hard to imagine a mariachi minstrel giving Britney Spears a run for her money, this traditional music of Mexico is growing in popularity in the United States.

And it's happening among the most unlikely group of listeners.

No longer is mariachi music simply for first-generation Hispanics longing for memories of their homeland. Mariachi is hip with the youngsters here — in contrast to Mexican adolescents' feelings about the music.

As this music, born a century ago in the pueblos around Guanajuato, becomes old-fashioned and uncool among youngsters in its country of origin, Mexican-American teens are embracing it and moving it forward.

Many Mexican-American teens are attempting careers in this challenging genre. US colleges are beginning to offer courses — and even considering degrees — in mariachi music. And competitions, such as the one in San Antonio, are spreading across the country as more and more young Hispanics reach for their roots.

### Mariachi explained

Originally the music of country people, mariachi was never meant to be mere idle singing, according to "Mexico, The Meeting of Two Cultures."

Rather, it drives a foot-stomping, floor-splintering dance technique called the *zapateado*, in which dancers pound their boot heels into the floor in a loud, clipped rhythm stressing the songs' weak beats.

A complete mariachi group includes six to eight violins, a guitar, and two trumpets, along with Mexican variations on the instruments: a round-backed guitar for catchy rhythm, a deep-voiced guitar for bass, and a Mexican folk harp for both bass and melody.

The contrast in sounds combines with a shifting beat and syncopation for lively music and a swift, driving pace.

— **Christina McCarroll**

"A lot of the younger people in Mexico don't listen to mariachi music, or only do so when they've had too much to drink or are melancholy," says Gregorio

Luke, the director of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, Calif.

Part of the problem within Mexico is the media's current focus on musical style rather than substance, he says. "The modern media [have] done a great deal to deteriorate the collective taste of the country.

"They basically look for people with visual appeal, and it doesn't really matter if they can sing well," he says. "But in the US, a whole generation of young people have not been exposed to the horrors of Mexican radio and television."

It's with this group of youngsters, raised on their parents' and grandparents' old mariachi records, that Mr. Luke sees the future of the music.

"With them, it hasn't gone out of fashion," he says. "And they are giving it a vitality not seen in Mexico for quite some time. They are changing the very syntax of the music."

But for those who are learning to play and sing, it's about so much more than form and function. It's about feeling.

"I like to tell stories," says 9-year-old Victoria Acosta, who last year won best of show at this competition and became the youngest person ever to do so. "And when I'm singing, it's like I'm telling a

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story.

"There are sad songs, and happy songs, and love songs – all different kinds of stories to tell," Victoria says as she takes her eyes away from the stage in the San Antonio Municipal Auditorium just long enough to explain her love for the music.

She was just 4 years old when her parents took her to hear a mariachi band. It was love at first sight – and sound.

She begged her parents to let her learn the music, and began taking vocal lessons with a local mariachi teacher.

Her parents had no hesitation about footing the bill.

"We need to do our part to preserve our culture," says her father, Ruben Acosta, a fifth-generation Mexican-American. "Mariachi music is so beautiful, we want to make sure it doesn't die out."

In many Mexican-American homes like the Acostas', Spanish is not spoken. Both parents have a working knowledge of the language, but are not fluent. That means many Hispanic children are learning Spanish for the first time through mariachi music.

Maria Elena Gonzales, a high-school senior, tries to describe "El Pastor," the song she has just finished performing. "It's about a shepherd who sings to his sheep," she says. "I don't really know Spanish, so I think that's what it's about."

Her family speaks Spanish when they are together, but in typical teenage fashion, Maria Elena says she never paid attention. "I guess I never really wanted to know what they were saying." She and her best friend, Lizzette Abreu, began learning mariachi songs just two years ago while participating in a ballet folklorico group in Houston.

"I grew to love it," says Lizzette, clothed in white lace-up boots and a white *traje de charro*, the female version of the mariachi suit. "I have a place for it in my heart. When I sing, I feel like I am in Mexico."

Her mother, on the other hand, was shocked when her daughter came to her with a request to sing mariachi music. Lucila Ruiz moved to Houston 37 years ago from Mexico City and thought she had left behind her roots in favor of a life in the United States.

"When she used to listen to mariachi music in her room, I told her: '[Turn] it off. We're from here now,'" says Ms. Ruiz. "But I could see she really felt it in her heart, and so I'm proud of her."

#### From Spain to Mexico

Mariachi music got its start as pure folk music and included several instruments brought over from Spain in the 16th century. Nobody knows exactly when the first mariachi band was formed, but scholars say there are references to the music as early as 1852.

But after the Mexican revolution of 1910, the genre exploded in popularity.

As mariachis made their way to Mexico City in the 1920s and '30s, they abandoned their white cotton shirts and pants in favor of the more formal attire of the *ranchero*. Known as the *traje de charro*, it is a waist-length jacket and fitted pants adorned with fancy embroidery and oversized silver buttons.

The groups grew in size and experi-

mented with a variety of instruments.

Today a traditional mariachi group may include trumpets, violins, a *viuela* (a traditional Spanish stringed instrument), a guitar, a *guitarrón* (oversized guitar), and a harp. All members are usually accomplished singers as well.

Learning to play an instrument or train a voice for mariachi is no small task. It takes dedication, so children have to be serious about pursuing the music. Many take voice lessons from trained teachers, and begin learning an instrument in junior high school.

"Mariachi music takes skill and study and practice," says Jeff Nevin, the leader of Mariachi Champaña Nevin and an assistant professor of music at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, Calif. "The quality of the music is on par with classical music. It's not just four guys playing 'La Bamba' in a restaurant. These musicians are the best of the best."

#### Mariachi in the classroom

Dr. Nevin is working hard to offer the nation's first mariachi degree at Southwestern. A growing number of colleges offer mariachi programs, though not degrees. And many predominantly Hispanic school districts offer mariachi programs in addition to band and choir programs.

"This musical genre is absolutely not dying. If anything, it's experiencing a resurgence," he says. "That's evident in the surge of mariachi programs in high



**WAITING TO SING:** Iris Zambrano of Hebronville, Texas, pauses backstage at San Antonio's Municipal Auditorium before competing with mariachi performers from elementary-school to college level. Competitors came from as far away as Michigan.

schools all over the United States."

Indeed, many high school students at the San Antonio competition say they are planning their college careers around universities with strong mariachi programs, such as the University of Texas-Pan American in Ebinburg or Texas A&M International University in Laredo.

Abiel Hinajosa says he hopes to attend A&M International, because of its outstanding mariachi program.

Currently a junior at Roma High School in south Texas, Abiel began learning to play the harp in the sixth grade – along with most of the members of his mariachi band.

While he's not planning to make a career out of playing mariachi, Abiel says the music is in his blood, and he doubts he will ever give it up.

A fellow mariachi performer, Jorge Perez, was not so culturally motivated when he first started playing the *guitarrrón*.

"I had to learn to like the music," he says, donning his felt hat, grabbing his instrument, and heading for the stage. "My grandpa used to play the guitar and sing. And when he found out I was playing in a mariachi band, it surprised him a lot."

"Don't ask me why, but when I'm playing, I feel a lot closer to my Mexican roots."

**“I like to tell stories, and when I'm singing, it's like I'm telling a story.”**

– Victoria Acosta, below, the youngest-ever best-of-show winner at the mariachi extravaganza.

