Young players give boost to mariachi

Mariachi musicians may not get the spotlight that superstar Christina Aguilera and Jennifer Lopez get, but mariachi music is here to stay, Enduring interest in the century-old mariachi tradition is being fueled by a continuing influx of young players.

"Mariachi music is a big part of our culture and our heritage. For many kids, mariachi music is another way to connect with their past," said Rodri Rodriguez, producer of the Mariachi USA Festival going on this weekend in Los Angeles.

The event features Mariachi Imperial de Mexico, Mariachi Mayor 2000 and the Mariachi USA Ballet. Also performing are Mariachi Los Arerios from El Paso and San Antonio's Mariachi Campanarios de America.

In the last two decades, mariachi instruction at the high school and university levels has increased, as has mariachi competition and conferences throughout the country, but particularly in the Southwest.

Rodriguez said the increased academic and professional activities strongly supplement mariachi's widespread presence.

"Mariachi music is played everywhere from weddings and quinceaneras to Mother's Day and Valentine's Day senoritas," said Rodriguez, who is working to integrate mariachi music into mainstream culture.

She has produced the mariachi festival at the Hollywood Bowl for the last 12 years and estimates annual attendance at more than 10,000 fans. In a new move this year, Rodriguez taped a "Mariachi USA" special that aired on pay-per-view TV late last month.

"We had to get the special aired on network TV, but the executives felt there was no audience for it," she said. "When the numbers come in, we're hoping to prove there is a big audience for this."

While preserving tradition is important, supporting youth who believe in that culture is vital.

San Antonio's annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza is one of the largest conferences in the country, bringing more than 1,000 students to town for a month of workshops, seminars and performances.

"All this helps promote our culture," Garza said. "Whether you're Tejanos or norteno fans, it all starts with the music, and mariachi music is part of that. It's our original roots music."

Music news

The Fourth of July Star Spangled Festival at Lackland AFB on July 4 will feature a fireworks display and musical fireworks with David Lamb, Gaspa y Los Musicales, Los Kumbia Kings and Chris Chalil.

Scheduled for release Tuesday is the soundtrack for "Crazy Beautiful," a teen drama with a bicentennial theme starring Jay Hernandez and Kirsten Dunst. It features tracks from top alternative Latin and Anglo artists, including a new song in English by La Ley "Everytime," also reprinted in Spanish as "Siempre" as a bonus track and Seven Mary Three's "Wait." Other participating acts include Fastball, Mellow Man Ace and Delinquent Habits.

Fans of West Coast norteno should check out the new sophomore album by Los Jardineros de Jesus Chavez Jr., "Cinco Años," Chavez's father leads the veteran group Los Originales de San Juan.

Coming up is the latest by Los Trajeiros del Norte, "Reencuentra," which includes romantic norteno songs and is scheduled for a July 9 release.

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