



COURTESY PHOTO

Benjamin Valdez (right), a pioneer in the development of mariachi music, formed Los Conquistadores in 1946.

Mariachi pioneer gains hall of fame honor

Recognized as a pioneer in the development of mariachi music in San Antonio, violinist Benjamin Valdez will be inducted this year into the Mariachi Extravaganza's Hall of Fame.

Born in 1919 in Lockhart, Valdez has spent almost a lifetime performing and teaching mariachi music.

He began as a roving troubadour in 1939, playing at Market Square. In 1946, he formed Los Conquistadores, a trio with the legendary Jose Morante and Henry Rodriguez.

The golden age of the trios — the late '40s and '50s — was capped by the world tours of the legendary Trio Los Panchos. During this time, Los Conquistadores garnered national recognition for themselves and the city, appearing on "The Arthur Godfrey Show," "The Garry Moore Show" and other popular variety shows of the day. Valdez offered the first private mariachi lessons in San Antonio, teaching classes in violin, guitar, vihuela, guitarrón and

trumpet. His lessons formed the basis for the programs at the Guadalupe Cultural Center and local high schools.

Jesse Orta, the first recipient of the Ruben Fuentes Award, began his mariachi career learning from and playing with Valdez. Valdez was instrumental in the creation of Orta's mariachi groups, and for teaching other orchestra-trained musicians of the day the sones and rancheras of mariachi. His students included Jesus Guerra-El Cabrito, Carlos Leon, Frank Peña, Ben Sanchez, Roland Alcocer, Oscar Cavazos and Al Castro. In the late 1950s, Valdez played violin in San Antonio's first mariachi group, Mariachi Chapultepec, accompanying a young vocalist by the name of Rosita Fernandez. Already forging new ground, Mariachi Chapultepec recorded a popular tune that received plenty of radio airplay — "La Chispita" — a mariachi-style cumbia. Later, he started his own group, El Mariachi Caminantes.

— Ramiro Burr