



COURTESY PHOTO

Los Arrieros, who open for Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán Saturday at Municipal Auditorium, call themselves a performing group rather than just a band of backup musicians.

Mariachi mainstream

Group wants to bring music to forefront

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The mariachis who stroll through Mexican restaurants represent a stereotypical image that sometimes make mariachis seem like little more than amateurs.

However, Mariachi Los Arrieros musical director Juan Contreras argues that touring mariachis are twice as good as classical and jazz groups.

"It depends on the musicians and the group. There are some groups that are just outstanding, and there are obviously some that are content with just being background musicians in a restaurant," Contreras said.

Contreras, 28, said the members' commitment to their stage presence sets them apart from other practitioners of technically complex music.

"Mariachi is difficult because you have to balance the performance and the execution of

Mariachi schedule

Friday

■ **Workshops:** Begin at 8 a.m. in the Convention Center, 200 E. Market St. at South Alamo

■ **Group competition:** 5-10 p.m., Municipal Auditorium, south of McCullough and Avenue A, downtown



CONTRERAS

the music," he said. "Classical musicians really have to be good at executing the music, but they are not the best performers; they're kind of boring. Jazz is that way, too. People really get into what they are doing, and they're not very exciting (visually)."

Los Arrieros open for Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Municipal Auditorium. Ticket prices range from \$20 to \$100 and are available through Ticketmaster outlets.

The concert is part of Ford and Lincoln Mercury's seventh annual Mariachi Vargas Extra-

Saturday

■ **Vocal competition:** 8 a.m.-noon, Municipal Auditorium

■ **Mariachi Vargas concert:** 7:30 p.m., Municipal Auditorium. Also features Mariachi Los Arrieros (with musical director Juan Contreras) and competition winners. Tickets \$20-\$100 at Ticketmaster outlets.

Sunday

■ **Mariachi Mass:** 8 a.m., San Fernando Cathedral, 115 Main Plaza

More info: (210) 225-3353

vaganza, which begins at 8 a.m. today with music workshops.

The show also includes an induction ceremony into the Mariachi Music Hall of Fame for pioneer Benjamin Valdez, 83, who founded the local trio Los Conquistadores in the late 1940s. He was also the first musician to offer private mariachi lessons in San Antonio. He will be presented with the Ruben Fuentes Award.

The mariachi group competition runs from 5-10 p.m. tonight. The vocal competition runs from 8 a.m. to noon Saturday.

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ARRIEROS

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Both events are free. The winners will perform at Saturday evening's concert.

The Extravaganza concludes with a mariachi Mass at 8 a.m. Sunday at San Fernando Cathedral.

Made up of students and teachers from El Paso, Los Arrieros were formed in 1996. Its members' ages range from 20 to 28. The group dubs itself a "progressive mariachi." It plays the classics, but is also known for its banda medley and an arrangement of Son by Four's ballad hit "A Puro Dolor."

Contreras, who plays harp, said better marketing could help mariachis get airplay and album sales on their own without having to back up a famous singer.

"Once you say 'mariachi,' they (radio) just put you on a shelf and it's just background music," he said. "We want to promote Los Arrieros as a performing group with its own name, like Los Tigres

del Norte, Banda El Recodo or Vicente Fernandez."

Another goal is to put its isolated hometown on the map. "We created it to make a world-class group here in El Paso. Nothing like us has ever come out of El Paso," Contreras said.

With aspirations of landing a recording contract and touring regularly, the group places a high priority on its members' dedication to the music.

"We're all young, but most of us are very sure this is what we want to do in life," Contreras said. "We love to perform and we just love for people to hear and see us so they can see the love we have for the music."

In addition to Contreras, the group's lineup is Angel Hernandez, guitar; Omar Olivas, vihuela; Javier Villarreal, guitar-rón; Rolando Morales, Allen Hodson and Richard Muñoz, trumpet; Jose Montes, Hector Rodriguez, Scott Gray, Jason Marquez and Rene Castañeda, violin.

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