

ON THE TOWN

Mariachi music, dying in Mexico, alive in Gwinnett

By **ROBERT HADDOCKS**
rhaddock@ajc.com

If you want to hear authentic mariachi music, don't go to Mexico.

While gaining popularity here in United States, the passionate, string-driven music is waning in its birthplace, replaced by American music and other Latin grooves.

"It's ironic, but you go to Mexico, and mariachi is almost dead," said Yamil Yunes, who brings his award-winning band, Mariachi Roma, to the Children's Arts Museum at the Hudgens Center at 11 a.m. Saturday.

Yunes and his band of 18 high school students from Roma, Texas, a town just minutes away from the Mexican border, won a competition last November in San Antonio.

The prize was a free trip to Atlanta.

The band is scheduled to arrive in the city today and will perform at several venues, including the Rialto Theatre for a Saturday night concert.

The practice has paid off for Yunes' mariachi band. Many schools in Texas have begun incorporating mariachi, he said, but only as an after-school program. At Roma, it's been incorporated into the curriculum as a credit-

receiving elective, and Roma is the only school to have hired a director and an assistant director, Yunes said.

"As a consequence, the program has really flourished," said Yunes. "I think we have set a standard here. This is not a regular mariachi band that you would hear in a restaurant, with loud music and an auto-tuned violin. This is more like an orchestra. It's very impressive. These kids play so well that they burn the house down."

Originating more than 100 years ago, mariachi music uses strings, including violins and harps, horn sections and sophisticated arrangements. The traditional mariachi music played by Roma is often inspired by passionate love, patriotism or a particular ranch or countryside, said Xochitl Mora, senior account executive with Muñoz Public Relations, which represents Ford Motor Co. For the seventh consecutive year, the automaker sponsored the November mariachi competition in San Antonio.

Mora, a Mexican, sees Latin American music growing in the United States because of the influx of Hispanics. In Gwinnett County, the Hispanic population from 1990 to 2000 has swelled from 9,000



J. MICHAEL SHORT / Special

Mayra Guerra is a member of Mariachi Roma, a band of high school students from Roma, Texas, who will play at the Hudgens Center for the Arts Saturday.

to more than 64,000, a 657 percent increase, according to census figures.

The growth has led to a cross-cultural experience across the country, Mora said, with many cities, like San Antonio, playing mariachi music to celebrate at city events.

"The general market is becoming more aware of Latin American music. It is becoming

more popular," said Mora. "The charm lies in the fact that it is a very feisty type of music, very passionate, so when people listen they can't help but tap their foot or feel the emotion of the song."

Admission for the show at the Hudgens Center at 6400 Sugarloaf Parkway is \$5. For more information, call 770-623-6002.