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Harvard mariachi band to compete to S.A.

Ivy League students, used to getting weird looks, will join the Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza.

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When you think of Harvard University, you might think of ivy-covered towers, the Hasty Pudding Club or a mariachi band.

Wait a minute.
A mariachi band?
At Harvard?

San Antonian Maryam Janani, a Harvard student who plays in the university's Mariachi Veritas, says she is used to the quizzical looks.

"I kind of expected it, because this group is fairly new compared to other organizations," she said during a recent telephone interview from her apartment. "I continued to hear that the diversity at Harvard was extreme, and there were so many different cultural organizations."

Not only does Harvard have its own mariachi, but the troupe has been

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For more on Mariachi Veritas and Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza

around five years. This year, the troupe takes a giant step forward by competing for the first time in the 2007 Ford Motor Co. Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza this weekend in San Antonio at Municipal Auditorium.

The troupe is competing in the group category. Its student director, Beatrice Viramontes, is competing in the vocalist category.

According to festival officials, more than 40 groups and 35 singers from all over the country are competing in elementary-, middle-, high school- and university-level competition.

The winner in each category will perform and open the Mariachi Vargas concert Saturday. This is the 13th year for the extravaganza, which has al-

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COURTESY PHOTO

Members of Harvard University's Mariachi Veritas include (front, from left) Sonali Palchoudhuri, Lauren Yapp, Maryam Janani, Beatrice Viramontes, Adam Kundishora (back, from left), Nathaniel Naddaff-Hafrey, David Garcia, Kevin McMullen and Yening Qin.

Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza attracts Harvard group

MARIACHI SCHEDULE

2007 Ford Motor Co. Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza events:

Noche de Cultura 7 p.m. today, Instituto Cultural de México

Serenata en el Río 6 p.m. Thursday, Rivercenter Mall Lagoon

Mariachi Workshops* 8 a.m. Friday, Convention Center

Mariachi Group Competitions* 5 p.m. Friday, Municipal Auditorium

Mariachi Vocal Competitions* 9 a.m. Saturday, Municipal Auditorium

Mariachi Connection Jam Mariachi Connection store, 2106 W. Commerce St., 12:30 p.m. Saturday

Mariachi Vargas Concert* 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Municipal Auditorium

*Requires advance registration or tickets to attend. All other events are free and open to the public.

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ways been headlined by Mariachi Vargas.

New festival events include a mariachi art exhibit at Centro Cultural Aztlan and a performance by harpist Julio Martínez at the Instituto Cultural de México.



JANANI

"I love that we have great community partners that are a big part of the extravaganza, such as the Centro Cultural Aztlan and the Instituto Cultural de México," said festival producer Cynthia Munoz. "This, combined with the fact that we've attracted an Ivy League university to the event, (shows) that people embrace and celebrate the cultural tradition of mariachi music."

Despite the fact that Mariachi Veritas hails from a part of the United States not normally considered mariachi country, Viramontes says the group's dedication is as just as fierce as that of troupes from around the Southwest.

"We work hard every year to be the best that we can be," Viramontes said. "Every year it changes because we get new members, and it's hard for new members to come in and memo-

rize 20 songs in a couple of weeks.

"So we often work off our music. But when big shows come around, like (the) 'Cultural Rhythm' (annual festival), we take many hours to prepare our set, memorize it, and present ourselves like a professional mariachi.

"The reason I wanted to bring the mariachi to the competition was so that we can challenge ourselves and find another way for us to get better and grow, and also have an experience that we've never had before. Not only competing, but challenging ourselves in a new and different way, and getting to interact with other student mariachis."

Janani, a Madison High School graduate majoring in biology, plays the violin in the group. She said Veritas plays more than just traditional mariachi music.

"I'm not typically mariachi — I'm a big fan of Selena," she said. "We do some songs of hers. I enjoy 'Cielo Rojo,' that has a very intense aspect to it, and 'Demasiado Tarde.' I like 'Como la Flor,' and 'No me Queda Más.' Obviously not really mariachi, but a lot of the people we play for really like it and they recognize these songs, especially here in the Latino community at Harvard. We also play 'Tú, Sólo Tú.'

"I'm half Iranian, half Mexican. I grew up more with the Iranian aspect than the Mexican aspect. In San Antonio, the culture is basically Mexican, so I grew up listening to Selena when I was younger, and knew about her history, when she died, the movie. I have all her songs. It was really important for me, growing up in the household."

Mariachi Veritas is made up of nine members who come from across the country — California, Massachusetts, Texas.

Janani said the group has run up against some mariachi stereotypes that have nothing to do with the seeming oddity of being from Harvard. When they participated in the annual "Cultural Rhythms," they were asked to welcome festival guest Salma Hayek at the airport.

"So we got the privilege to go to the airport and greet her when she flew in," Janani said. "One of our guitar players, Nathaniel, is half-Lebanese, as she is too. And he's really tall, and she made a comment about how she thought mariachis were supposed to be a little short and a little round.

"And she was surprised to see a Lebanese mariachi that was tall and thin."

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