Mariachi (USA)  Donald A. Henriques

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Musical tradition originating in western Mexico. Mariachi refers to a rural music and dance tradition from Mexico’s western region and is identified specifically with the states of Jalisco, Colima, and Michoacán; however as a regional cultural practice, mariachi is also linked to the surrounding states of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Nayarit, and Zacatecas. The mariachi ensemble typically consists of trumpet, violin, vihuela, guitar, and guitarrón. Musicians wear the traje de charro, or suit of the Mexican cowboy, a style of dress associated with the rural western region. The hallmark of the mariachi repertory is the regional son. While a number of music and dance genres (some with indigenous implications such as the jarabe), were part of pre-20th-century local repertories, the son jalisciense defined the tradition’s regional identity.

Cuarteto Coculense, a group from the area of Cocula in the state of Jalisco, made the first mariachi sound recordings in 1908. Brought to Mexico City to perform at the birthday party of President Porfirio Diaz, the ensemble consisted of two violins, vihuela, and guitarrón. In Tecalitlán, an area southeast of Cocula, a different version of the mariachi included two violins, guitarrón de golpe, and harp. These instruments, the guitarrón de golpe and harp, were identified with Mariachi Vargas of the late 1890s through 1940. During this time the trumpet would appear occasionally with the mariachi, however it would not be a regular member of the ensemble until 1941.

In the early 1920s Mariachi Coculense de Cirilo Marmolejo was established as the first urban mariachi in Mexico City. By the mid-1930s mariachi reached a new level of recognition as a result of radio broadcasts. The ranch-themed films in the 1940s and 50s starring singer/actors Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, along with the popularity of the canción ranchera genre, established mariachi as a global sound symbol of Mexico.

In the 1960s and 70s individual efforts were made to create mariachi programs within public school systems in the United States. An important vehicle for achieving and sustaining these programs was the “mariachi conference movement.” These conferences provided an opportunity for school-age children to receive instruction from the most well-known mariachis in Mexico and the United States. The first mariachi conference was held in San Antonio, Texas, in 1979. Success quickly spread with mariachi conferences and festivals in Tucson, Fresno, Albuquerque, La Cruces, and San José, to name a few. Prominent US mariachi groups such as Los Camperos de Nati Cano (Los Angeles, CA) and Mariachi Cobre (Orlando, FL) have been particularly active in mariachi education since the early 1980s.

In 1987 pop singer Linda Ronstadt released Canciones de mi padre (Songs of my Father), a recording that also featured musical arrangements by Rubén Fuentes of Mariachi Vargas. Propelled by her iconic status in 1970s American popular music, Ronstadt’s album reached double platinum, selling over two million copies. A second recording, Más canciones, was released in 1991. The popularity of these recordings as well as her subsequent touring signaled a renewed interest in mariachi among young Latinos in the United States as well as the music’s appeal to non-Latino audiences.
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