

# Traditional Music of the Mexican Mestizos

Daniel E. Sheehy



Señor Pedro Ayala Sr. of Donna, Tex., is known throughout the Rio Grande Valley as the "Monarch of the Accordion." His father played and composed tunes, as he does, and his sons also follow in the musical tradition of the family.

Photo by Alicia Gonzalez for the Smithsonian.

Mexico is a land of many musical traditions. Each of its many Indian groups has its own musical systems, occasions, and repertoires. Among large-city dwellers there are many "communities of taste," ranging from preferences for Western classical music to international popular and protest music. The rural *mestizos* (a mixture of Spanish and Amerindian populations and cultures) also maintain a variety of musical traditions. *Mestizo* music, along with related traditions among Mexican-Americans, is included in the 1978 Festival of American Folklife.

The music of Mexican *mestizos* has many common roots. Language, poetic structures, most musical instruments, and many musical forms derive from Spanish prototypes imported during colonial times. Most other traditional song and dance forms stem from early original *mestizo* developments (such as the music-dance forms called *son* and *jarabe*, first appearing in the late 18th century) or from 19th-century musical importations from Europe (the waltz, polka, and schottische, for example). The music's base in rural Mexican life creates common musical themes, occasions, contexts, and attitudes.

In spite of these common roots and socioeconomic situations, longstanding geographic, economic, and social isolation has given rise to many unique regional musical traditions. In many cases, each region is distinguished by its own instrumentation, musical style, and repertory of compositions. Unfortunately, widespread urbanization and the expanding

sphere of influence of the commercial media have encroached considerably on the native "breeding grounds" of many traditions. As a result, some of the local traditions have been shouted out of existence by media-imposed music. On the other hand, a few have not only survived in the wake of rapid social change, but have even achieved a certain degree of international popularity, resulting in the simultaneous existence of rural, urban, and international commercialized versions of a single tradition.

Many full-time professional musicians have left their former work as small-scale ranchers and farmers, fishermen, carpenters, charcoal makers, rural milkmen, and the like. Other musicians have continued in nonmusical professions and perform music for personal enjoyment or to augment their incomes. The most urban, professional, and commercial Mexican folk ensemble is the *mariachi*. Native to Jalisco in western Mexico, the *mariachi* has become popular throughout Mexico and the southwestern U.S. Its contemporary form crystallized in the 1930s, when trumpets were added to the basic ensemble of violins, regional guitars, called *vihuela*, *guitarra de golpe*, *guitarrón*, and, in some areas, a large harp.

Closely related historically to the *mariachi* is the *conjunto arpa grande* ("big harp" ensemble) from the *tierra caliente* ("hot land") of neighboring Michoacán. The *conjunto's* instrumentation closely resembles that of the *mariachi*, but without trumpets. Unlike the *mariachi*, however, it has not been adopted by the commercial media, and remains essentially a rural tradition.

One step further south is the *tierra caliente* of the state of Guerrero, home of the *conjunto tamborita*. Mainly comprised of string instruments—violins, guitars, and a *guitarrón*—the group is distinguished by an additional in-

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strument, the *tamborita*, a small drum. The *conjunto tamborita* has not fared well in the competition with commercial music and today may be included among the many endangered species of folk traditions.

On the coastal plain of the eastern state of Veracruz, most traditional musical life centers around the *conjunto jarocho*, or "jarocho ensemble." *Jarocho* refers to the people native to the area. A harp and regional guitars called *jarana* and *requinto* form the core of the group. The *son jarocho*, practically the only traditional music from the area, is recognizable by its fast rhythm, witty texts, and a generous amount of improvisation. The *son* may accompany the *zapateado*, a type of dancing involving fast, complex footwork.

The Huasteca region to the northwest is the home of the *trío huasteco*, comprised of one violin and two guitars, the *guitarra quinta* and the *jarana*. The trio's music is similar to that of the *conjunto jarocho* in that there is a tendency to improvise both instrumental melodies and texts. Also,

the main traditional musical genre is the *son*, although among the Huastecans it is more commonly referred to as the *huapango*. Finally, another trademark of *música huasteca* is the frequent use of falsetto in vocal melodies.

The Mexican presentation at the 1978 Festival will include dancers, musicians, and singers from the Mexican states of Puebla, Michoacán, Guerrero, and Veracruz. All the groups come from the central area of Mexico where the largest concentration of colonial population settled and thus one can see a heavy, but not exclusive, Spanish influence in their music. Instruments derive from colonial Spanish prototypes, although the drum used by the Puebla group is a modern variant of the ancient Aztec *húehuetl*. Melodies derive from Spanish and other European sources, but show the distinct Mexicanization of these musical traditions. Like so much of Mexico's traditional culture, the music presented here is the unique product of its rich historical and regional origins.

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*A conjunto jarocho from Los Angeles in performance at the 1975 Festival.*  
Photo by James Pickerell for the Smithsonian.

*Musica Azteca, a chirimia and drum group, participated in the 1976 Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife.*

