



The magnificent mariachi

Music journalist and radio host **Catalina Maria Johnson** on the origins and enduring appeal of Mexico's most famous musical export

Every summer when we visited my mom's hometown in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, there was bound to be at least one family gathering at which a mariachi ensemble played. Glasses would be raised high and rousing sing-a-longs abounded when a dozen or so elegantly clad musicians played the emblematic Mexican music – recognized by UNESCO in 2011 as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Mariachi music has been a part of Mexico's celebrations practically since the ensembles were born – according to popular legend – in the town of Cocula, a city outside Guadalajara, Jalisco. The earliest mariachis appeared in the early 19th century, but mariachi's forebears existed as early as the 17th century.

The origins of the word "mariachi" are mysterious. One of the most popular theories is that during the French intervention in the 19th century, mariachis got their name from the French word for "marriage," as they often played at weddings. Many musicologists, however, reject this theory, noting that the earliest mentions of mariachis predate this period. Others believe the somewhat complicated

notion that over a century earlier, indigenous people created a song to praise the Virgin, and their terms for "Maria's song" evolved into the word "mariachi."

Instrumental beginnings

Regardless of the origins of its name, during the time between the colony and independence (1519-1810), the classic Mexican mariachi developed to include the violin and guitar. Other stringed instruments were then introduced by the Spanish, such as the *vihuela* (a high-pitched, five-string guitar with a round back) and the harp, which was later replaced by the *guitarrón*, a large acoustic bass with six strings. Trumpets, now an essential feature of the music, were added last, in the early part of the 20th century.

Mariachis tend to be large ensembles featuring up to 20 musicians. The result is a full, flamboyant sound with sharply contrasting yet complementary textures – stirring vocals accompanied by soaring violin strings, bright trumpets, the bold percussive strumming of guitars, and assorted rhythms that evidence European influences, such as waltzes and polkas, as well as African and indigenous folk traditions. Mariachi music is designed to inspire strong, direct emotions: joy, pride, sadness, tenderness, passion, rebelliousness, and of course, soul-wrenching heartbreak.

Originally more rural in dress and style, mariachis became an integral part of official celebrations and a symbol of Mexican nationalism after singing at a



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presidential event for foreign dignitaries organized by President Porfirio Díaz in the early 20th century. That particular event was also one of the first in which mariachis performed in the now iconic *charro* or Mexican cowboy attire: fitted black pants with silver decorations (usually related to equestrian themes), richly embroidered wide-brimmed hat and waist-length jacket, fancy white shirt, tie in a large bow, and riding boots.

Today, mariachi music, though practically synonymous with Mexican music, has spread worldwide. Its most famous exponent, the renowned





GETTY

Clockwise from left: A mariachi band at San Antonio de Padua monastery in Yucatán; all-female Mariachi Flor de Toloache on Brooklyn Bridge in New York; maracas

femininity (albeit making the controversial decision to wear *charro* pants rather than the traditional long skirts usually favored by all-women mariachis), a sense of vibrant multiculturalism, and ability to toggle between Spanish-language standards and English-language pop, are taking mariachi to places it's never been before.

It's safe to say that we haven't seen the last stage in the evolution of mariachi music – no doubt the soul-stirring passion and immense charm that have kept it alive for centuries will enchant many a generation to come.



CATALINA'S MARIACHI MUSIC

I invite you to sit back and check out my essential mariachi playlist on Spotify at spoti.fi/2CIIIG1c
Sip on a tequila, and raise a toast to life, love, and adventure.

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Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, is more than 100 years old and in its fifth generation of musicians.

All-female Mariachi bands

As in the past, today's mariachi tunes are rife with stories of love, death, betrayal, heroic deeds, and equestrian themes. However, one of the most radical changes in mariachi music came about in the last century when the genre was transplanted to the U.S. Mariachi music not only became a symbol of Mexican-American pride, but all-women ensembles began forming in the 1970s in cities as diverse as Topeka, Kansas, and Los Angeles, California.

Today, the genre is being redefined by New York City's all-female Mariachi Flor de Toloache. Founded by Mireya Ramos, who is of Dominican and Mexican descent, Flor de Toloache's 2017 Latin Grammy Award has put them on a whole new level. Mariachi Flor de Toloache's fierce



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