

“The Very First Mariachi Recordings”--Cuarteto Cocolense (1908-1909)

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Essay by Jeff Nevin (guest post)*



Cuarteto Cocolense

One might wonder why a mariachi album, much less one originally recorded on wax cylinders in Mexico, would be included in the Library of Congress, but mariachi today is an integral part of American culture: there are hundreds of schools with mariachi programs at all levels across the country (elementary schools through graduate degrees), and countless student and professional mariachi musicians performing in the US (believe it or not, there are far more mariachis in the US than in Mexico today). People everywhere enjoy mariachi music in restaurants, at parties or public events, in concert halls, on TV and in the movies, etc., not to mention the fact that the US was 18.7% Hispanic in 2020, and is expected to reach 29%--nearly a third of the population--by 2050. And while the casual, non-Hispanic Americans have certainly heard, and hopefully enjoyed, mariachi music, to these first, second or third generation Americans whose relatives were born in Mexico or other Latin American countries, mariachi music is a profound link to their cultural heritage. Living in a different country from their parents/grandparents--with children who speak a different language, with different culture and customs--people long for something that can bring generations of their families together, and mariachi music is one of the most powerful. So how did we get here, and what does this recording represent? Let's think for a moment about mariachi in the US and the true origins of mariachi centuries ago, and then we'll understand why this recording is such an important artifact.

Perhaps the most important moment for mariachi in the US was Linda Ronstadt's recording "Canciones de mi Padre" in 1987. This brought the highest-level mariachi music to the broadest possible American audience: "Canciones" is certified double-platinum, still the highest-selling non-English album in the US. Linda sang with mariachis on "Saturday Night Live" and on "Sesame Street" with the Muppets! And her tours were sold out with mostly non-Hispanic people attending. The attention she drew helped to spur the popularity of mariachi music in the US that led to the explosion of school-based mariachi programs which continues today.

But Linda didn't create mariachi, of course, and, in fact, her albums were admittedly quite old-fashioned: they were a tribute to the songs her father taught her when she was young, that he learned and sang *when he was young*. So where did those songs come from? The modern mariachi that is known throughout the US and is in fact well-known all over the world, is actually the product of the film and music industries in Mexico City in the first half of the 20th century.

Think of Mexico City as “Hollywood of the Spanish Speaking World”: in the 1930-50's, Europe and Asia were consumed with, and recovering from, World War II, but Hollywood and Mexican cinema both had their “Golden Age” at this time! There weren't a lot of Japanese or Russian romantic comedies made in the 1940's, but this is the moment that Hollywood and Mexico City both supplied the world with much-needed entertainment. In the US, most people only know about the Hollywood stars and movies--Jimmy Stewart, Kathrine Hepburn, John Wayne, Elizabeth Taylor, etc.--but throughout Latin America, the Mexican stars--Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, María Felix, etc.--are actually more famous than the American ones.

This is logical, of course, since Spanish-speaking countries would import Mexican movies and English-speaking countries would import American ones, but what's so interesting to me, that may surprise you, is that in many countries around the world where neither English nor Spanish is the dominant language, Mexican movies and stars are *equally as famous as the American ones!* Again, it's logical when you think about it: people in Germany, Russia, Hungary and other countries have to dub/subtitle English-language movies the same as they would Spanish-language ones, so for them there is no distinction between American and Mexican movies! And since mariachi was an important part of so many of these Golden Age movies, mariachi is very well-known and beloved around the world, especially in non-English-speaking countries. As an example of this, an older gentleman I met in Germany once told me, “Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante are very famous here,” and when I was performing “La historia de un amor” (made famous by Mexican trio Los Tres Ases in the 1950's) in Russia, the audience applauded with recognition, and a friend there told me, “That's one of the most famous songs in Russia.”

But again, mariachi didn't *originate* in the movies with famous movie stars singing to mariachi accompaniment in Mexico City, so where did the music truly originate? For this we need to go back a little farther--bear with me! The precise origin of mariachi is widely debated, but we know that mariachi grew out of the collision of cultures that occurred early in the 16th century, when European, African and Indigenous Mexican people--each with their own, rich musical traditions--found themselves living together in Mexico. People who grew up in the US remember from school that Columbus sailed to the Western Hemisphere in 1492. But in Mexico, the analogous date is 1519--that's when Cortés took an army of 500 men from Cuba to the Yucatán Peninsula and claimed it for the crown of Spain. Cortés then formed alliances with several indigenous nations, and they marched together on their common enemy, the Aztec Empire. In 1521, they defeated the Aztecs and claimed Tenochtitlán--renaming it México City.

A few things of note: the Spanish were *conquistadores*, “conquerors,” professional soldiers who were hired to do a job when they invaded Mexico. Unlike the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock, they didn't bring their wives and children. But after spending a small amount of time in Mexico, a significant number of these soldiers decided they would rather stay than return to

Europe: they got married, had children, and found new jobs to help support their new families. And very quickly a new race of people was formed, called *mestizo*, or “mixed race.”

Bernal Díaz wrote that Cortés always had musicians among his soldiers. One of these, named Ortiz, began teaching dance and viol in Mexico City in 1521, the same year as the conquest! Just a few years later, in 1526, Maese Pedro (known as “The Harpist”) and another soldier-musician, Benito de Bejel, opened the first formal, European dance school in Mexico City (a dance school which obviously included music too). And Spanish priests famously used music to evangelize to indigenous people: Franciscan Francisco Ximénez claimed that, as early as in 1525, he would hear hundreds of indigenous people humming simple and catchy European tunes, and that, “When joined to doctrine in their own tongue, the tunes so fascinated them that the boys in the friars’ school would crowd into the patio to sing them. Later, they would spend ‘three and four hours at a time repeating the tunes at home and at their various meeting places.’”

So we have ample, indisputable proof that Europeans went to Mexico, brought their music with them, decided to live there permanently, and immediately began to teach their music--European Renaissance Music!--to the indigenous and later mestizo people. And the African slave trade contributed too: about 200,000 African slaves were brought to México over 150 years, which is fewer than were brought to the US and other parts of the Americas, but this is not an insignificant number. When the slave trade ended in Mexico, these people mostly intermarried and blended in with the rest of the population, probably more so than in the US. So there are fewer pure “African-Mexicans” today, yet there are many Mexican people with significant African ancestry. In other words, the Africans, Spanish and Indigenous Mexican people intermingled and intermarried for centuries, created a new “mixed” race of people, and they did the same with their musics.

What happened for the next 300 years is not certain, but just as every musician knows, when musicians from different traditions get together, they always look for ways to play (collaborate) musically. In my opinion, the first time Indigenous Mexican people played European Renaissance music and instruments in their own way, with African influence and inflections, this is the moment mariachi was born--even if it wasn’t yet called “mariachi.”

There are several theories about where the word comes from but none of them can be proven 100% true. What we do know is the first mentions of the word “mariachi” (or sometimes “mariache” with an “e”) refer to the names of ranchos/towns: the earliest is the birth record of Ignacio de Lollola, who was born in 1833 “in the Rancho Mariachi,” in the western state of Nayarit. So, in 1833, *mariachi is a place!*

Next, we have a letter written in 1852 from a priest in Rosamorada, Nayarit, to the bishop in Guadalajara, Jalisco, asking for help because *fandangos* (parties) lasting several days are interfering with church services. These included drinking, gambling, dancing, and several groups of musicians--and “in this part of the country,” he said, “these fandangos are called mariachis.” So, in 1852, *mariachi is a party!*

The earliest dictionary definition of the word, in 1898, states that mariachi is “A dance by people from the pueblo”--so *mariachi is a dance!*

Which brings us to the start of the 20th century and the recording in question! In the year 1900, mariachi was not at all well known outside of rural, Western Mexico. Then, in the first decade of the 20th century, some of these rural musicians travelled to Mexico City, including the Cuarteto Coculense--or “Quartet from the town of Cocula”—and, in 1908-09, made the first-known recordings of mariachi music.

The wax cylinders they released didn't include the word “mariachi” either, but make no mistake, the recordings featured on this disc represent the most important turning point in the history of mariachi music. This is the moment when a little-known music/dance from small towns in rural western Mexico, that emerged 300 years after the Spanish conquest, suddenly became known outside of their pueblos/ranchos for the first time. Mariachi was recorded, mass produced, and disseminated from one of the biggest cities/metropolitan areas in the world to all of Mexico and eventually to the entire world.

This is the turning point: without this recording, mariachi would have never appeared on radio stations broadcast throughout all of Latin America, it wouldn't have appeared in Mexican movies, backing up Mexican superstar actors/singers onscreen and in recordings. Without this recording, Linda Ronstadt's father would probably have never heard of mariachi music, Linda may have never been inspired to become a singer (she certainly would have never recorded her mariachi albums), and the Hispanic community in the US would have to find another way to bring together generations of families across years and borders.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.