

Celebrating 100 years of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán

Back to Home Page

Events

Norteno/ Tejano
Festival

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Why Spanish
Language Radio?

20 Years
of Service

Línea Abierta and
Noticiero Latino

Satelite

Radio Bilingüe

Overnight Service

News, Talk Radio

Program Grid

Programs
Description

Mariachi Vargas was featured in the recent 15th Annual ¡Viva El Mariachi! Festival, sponsored by Radio Bilingüe.

Mariachi Vargas was founded in 1898 in the southern Jalisco village of Tecalitlán.

The pillars of the original four-man group were leader Gaspar Vargas (guitarra de golpe) and Manuel Mendoza (harp), accompanied by two violins.

In 1921, Gaspar replaced one of the violinists with his son, Silvestre Vargas.

By the end of that decade Mariachi Vargas's fame had spread throughout the region, and the quartet had become a quintet with the addition of a third violinist.

Around 1932, Gaspar Vargas turned the leadership of the mariachi over to his son, who had already demonstrated great potential for administration and public relations.

The ambitious young Silvestre expanded the group to eight musicians, adding a fourth violin, a guitar, and a guitarrón.

The newly reorganized group—uniformed for the first time in charro suits—caused a sensation wherever it performed.

In December of 1934, they traveled to the nation's capital to perform at the inauguration ceremony of president Lázaro Cárdenas, who subsequently had them hired as official mariachi of the Mexico City Police Department. With a steady salary to fall back on, Mariachi Vargas was able to take up permanent residence in the capital city. Silvestre had great dreams for his mariachi, but the long and circuitous road to their fulfillment was paved with many obstacles.

Mariachi Vargas was an unknown entity in Mexico City, where the competition was formidable. Other mariachis were already well established there; José Marmolejo and his Mariachi Tapatio had a virtual stranglehold on the artistic scene.

Although Mariachi Vargas was unique in the capital—both stylistically and in its high standards of punctuality, sobriety, and appearance—the group was not without its personnel problems and internal conflicts. On several

occasions it disbanded entirely. Silvestre remained undaunted, however, each time reorganizing his mariachi and coming back stronger than before. He promoted his group relentlessly, eventually obtaining a regular radio program on the powerful and prestigious station XEW.

In 1937, Mariachi Vargas appeared in *Así es mi Tierra*, the first of their nearly 200 motion pictures. That same year, they made their first phonograph recordings. By the end of the decade, they had signed an exclusive contract with RCA Victor and had recorded with legendary singer Lucha Reyes.

Jorge Negrete's 1942 film *El Peñón de las Animas* was the first motion picture in which Mariachi Vargas accompanied a "singing charro" superstar. Negrete's fame was soon eclipsed by that of Pedro Infante, for whom Vargas was also the mariachi of preference.

The box office success of films in which mariachis accompanied singer idols continued to grow, setting the stage for such artists as Amalia Mendoza, José Alfredo Jiménez, and Miguel Aceves Mejía, all of whose careers were linked to their association with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

Silvestre Vargas had an uncanny knack for recognizing raw talent. Miguel Martínez became the group's first trumpet player as a teenager in 1941, and today is considered the greatest mariachi trumpet player in history.

Young violinist Rubén Fuentes had never played mariachi music before Silvestre invited him to join Mariachi Vargas in 1944. Fuentes would go on to become the greatest musical director, arranger, and record producer in the history of mariachi music.

In the 1950s, Rubén Fuentes, as musical director of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, changed the course of mariachi history with his daring arrangements for Miguel Aceves Mejía and other artists.

The revolutionary concepts he developed during this period redefined the interplay between musical elements of the ensemble and created the archetype for contemporary mariachi arrangement and performance.

In 1955, Fuentes directed the Mariachi Vargas recording *El Mejor Mariachi del Mundo* (The World's Greatest Mariachi), which set the standard for performance of the son jalisco, and is considered the most influential mariachi LP of all time. Monumental albums of pasodobles, waltzes, jarabes, polkas, danzones, and light classical works followed—each redefining the state of the art for mariachi music. Vargas's performance on the 1965 recording *Sones de Jalisco* almost equaled that of its immortal son jalisco LP of a decade earlier.

In 1968, Rubén Fuentes, with the musical collaboration of Jesús Rodríguez de Hajar and Rigoberto Alfaro, produced the futuristic *La*

Nueva Dimensión, an album that anticipated trends that would become popular in mariachi music 20 years later. The same team of collaborators created *Fiesta en Jalisco* in 1970, initiating a craze for mariachi medleys, or popurrís, that has yet to run its course.

By the 1970s, the golden age of Mexican cinema was long over and the popularity of mariachi music was unquestionably on the decline. The 1973 death of ranchera music's greatest singer/songwriter, José Alfredo Jiménez, signaled the end of an era. But mariachi music continued to evolve, with Mariachi Vargas at its forefront. In the mid-1970s, they accompanied singer/songwriter Juan Gabriel on his earliest recordings, introducing a significant new form of expression in mariachi music.

In 1976, Pepe Martínez assumed the musical directorship of Mariachi Vargas, a position he holds to this day. With Vargas, Martínez transformed many of the embryonic arrangements he had recorded with other mariachis into such full-blown masterpieces as "Popurrí Los Gallos," and "El Cascabel."

Using ideas from his arrangement of "El Cascabel," he further stretched the boundaries of mariachi music with "Violín Huapango," a showpiece for novel rhythms and effects that features each player of the ensemble as a soloist.

By the 1970s, Mariachi Vargas was promoting itself as a self-contained act, using only its own members as vocalists. Fortunately for mariachi fans, they continued to accompany other singers, both in recordings and in concert.

Guadalupe Trigo's 1977 "Mi Ciudad" highlights some of the most important rhythmic innovation of that period, successfully fusing the elements of the son jalisciense with those of the joropo venezolano. Lucha Villa was one of the artists Mariachi Vargas accompanied most extensively through the 1970s and 1980s. Her 1984 double album *En Vivo en el Teatro de la Ciudad* possibly represents the finest live recording of mariachi music ever.

No one suspected that the first International Mariachi Conference in San Antonio, Texas in 1979 — featuring Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán — would signal the birth of a movement.

Nevertheless, U.S. mariachi festivals and conferences have proliferated since then, and Vargas has always been their most prestigious headliner.

Linda Ronstadt's mid-1980s guest appearances at the Tucson International Mariachi festival led to her Grammy Award winning 1987 *Canciones de mi Padre* album. Her recording and subsequent tour with Mariachi Vargas created an even greater audience for mariachi music, particularly among non-Hispanics.

The 1989 Vargas CD *En Concierto* marks the greatest rendering to date of classical music by a mariachi. Rubén Fuentes' award-winning productions for vocalist Lucero in the 1990s represent the best of contemporary popular song with mariachi accompaniment.

Fuentes' *50 Años con Música y Arreglos para el Mejor Mariachi del Mundo* magnificently documents this musician's contribution to the evolution of mariachi music during the last half-century. The 1994 release, *La Fiesta del Mariachi*, is destined to become another Vargas classic. Their latest work, *¡Viva El Mariachi!*, maintains the standard of excellence one has come to expect from Mariachi Vargas.

As Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán begins its 100th anniversary celebration, there have yet to be any serious challenges to its title, "The World's Greatest Mariachi." As we approach the twenty-first century, we look forward to another 100 years of "El Mejor Mariachi del Mundo."

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