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For the REFORMA NEWSLETTER

Confessions of a “*ranchera*” junkie....

By Bob Diaz

Olvidate de todo, menos de mi
Y vete a donde quiera, pero lleveme en ti,
Que al fin de tu camino, comprenderas tus males
Sabiendo que nacimos para morir iguales...
--Jose Alfredo Jimenez--

Music has always been a major influence in my life. While growing up in Tucson in the sixties, I listened mostly to American top 40 radio, but that wasn't the only kind of music to which I was exposed. My mother and father, for example, both loved listening to mariachis, especially when they were fronted by a talented singer belting out *rancheras*-- heart-wrenching songs about love, heartbreak, and loss-- the kind that can be found on Jose Alfredo Jimenez's hugely popular album, *La Enorme Distancia*, featuring Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlan (*RCA, 1961*). By the age of three or four, I knew practically every song on that album by heart, and even though I was too young to understand the meaning of the songs, I could tell even at that age that they packed a lot of punch, and that they were about something very deep and profound. My mom would sing these songs to us when we were small—classics like *Por Un Amor*, *Las Laureles* and *Gorrioncillo Pecho Amarillo*. She dearly loved this music and seemed happiest when she was at some party singing harmony with the neighborhood musicians, a beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other. She sure could sing...

Over time, my interest in the music of my parent's generation has only deepened. I have tried to learn as much as possible about it, by reading about it, listening to it, and by purchasing as much recorded music as I could find -- from 78's to mp3 files and everything in between. As the years have sped by I've acquired quite a collection! I thank my lucky stars that I've also had the opportunity to share my love of this music with others, by, for example, featuring mariachis and *canciones rancheras* on a radio show I hosted for several years in Tucson called “*The Chicano Connection*.”

As a librarian, I've shared my passion for this music with others by giving presentations about mariachis and *la musica ranchera* to a broad range of people, from the general public to other librarians. I have also had the opportunity to expand the University of Arizona Fine Arts Library's offerings by building a sizeable collection of books, cds, and films about Mexican folk and popular music. Providing access to this material not only satisfies the needs of students at the School of Music taking courses in Mexican folk music, world music and mariachi music, students and faculty in other departments like Mexican American Studies and Women's Studies also use the collection extensively. A gratifying by-product is that providing access to this material also helps fulfill a community need, as Tucson, home to the world-reknowned Tucson International Mariachi Conference and dozens of mariachi education programs, is bursting at the

seams with talented mariachi musicians and students eager to learn all they can about this music.

It's very gratifying to know that this genre of music is as popular as ever, as evidenced by the dozens of mariachi education programs, mariachi groups, and mariachi festivals that can be found all over the country. Because of this, I think that all libraries, whether they be academic, special or public, should strive to improve the level of access they provide to Mexican popular music, particularly mariachi and ranchera music. From what I can tell, very few, with the exception of handful of academic libraries in the West and Southwest, have decent collections. That said, a closer look at those libraries do have such collections reveals a certain lack of depth. If one, for example, wanted to find recordings by Lucha Villa or any of the other great Mexican ranchera singers, there wouldn't be much available to them at their local libraries. This is unfortunate because individuals like Lucha Villa played a huge role in popularizing and promoting the mariachi and ranchera sound, either through their recordings or their movies. (Many of these artists were also award winning actors, and they are all beloved icons in communities across Mexico and the U.S).

There are plenty of resources available that can be used for purposes of building collections of mariachi and ranchera music. These include, as already noted, *Billboard Magazine*, which includes reviews and charts noting top album sales and top hits; a number of websites devoted to mariachi music such as *Puro Mariachi* (www.puromariachi.com), and *La Fiesta De Mariachi* (www.fiestaweb.org); and a variety of commercial online mega-vendors, some of which provide useful reviews. (You know which ones these are, I'm sure). Even sources like Allmusic.com and Wikipedia provide some useful information, (although both sources can be inaccurate or incomplete at times). There are also a number of standard reference resources that can help one learn about mariachis and other genres of Mexican music. One such publication is Ramiro Burr's book, *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Mexican Regional Music* (New York: Billboard, 1999). It is really a biographical dictionary, but also includes discographical information. Other sources include *The Latino Encyclopedia* (Chabran and Chabran, New York : Marshall Cavendish, c1996), *The Encyclopedia of Latino Popular Culture* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2004) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinas and Latinos in the United States* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). and *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* (New York : Garland Pub., 1998-2002.) Recent monographic works about mariachis and la cancion ranchera include *Mariachi Music In America*, by Daniel Sheehy, *Mariachi for Gringos* by Gil Sperry and *El Mariachi. Simbolo musical de Mexico/ The Mariachi. Mexico's Musical Symbol* (Spanish Edition), by Jesus Jauregui.

In closing, I encourage all my fellow *REFORMISTAS* to become reviewers. We need to be proactive and help promote our cultural heritage, both the classic and the current, so that we can all provide more relevant materials to our communities. There are countless numbers of cds, books, and films that need a good review. If we don't do it, who will? We have the REFORMA Newsletter, and of course there is the REFORMA Wiki page

and all the other Web 2.0 tools that can be used to share information. Who needs Reed-Elsevier anyway? Adelante, REFORMA!

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