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# A tus brazos otra vez

by Susie Byrd

To El Pasoans, mariachis are our everyday. They are backyard birthday parties with the brinca-brinca. They are 40-year anniversary parties in big halls with old people dancing close while little kids in their starchy best glide along underfoot and teenagers in clothes too tight and too short smirk from the edges. They are Music Under the Stars with all of El Paso packed in next to friends and family. They are Saturday at the Tap with a plate of chiles relleños and a Tecate Michelada while a moon-eyed mariachi dressed in a powder blue polyester suit duded up with a whole lot of razzamatazz belts out "Volver" as if you are the only woman he has ever, or will ever, love.

In El Paso, mariachis are there for our most special days, and they are there to make our most everyday special.

So if you want to tell the rest of the world about what makes El Paso the place to be, better be sure to send some mariachis.

Which is what we did.

And we sent our very best—[Mariachis los Arrieros](#).

At the Smithsonian's invitation, the City's [Museum and Cultural Affairs Department](#) sent Los Arrieros to the 42nd annual [Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#) in Washington, D.C. The festival is an annual event held on the National Mall. Every year, it features the culture, music and food of a particular part of the world. This year, it featured Texas, NASA and Bhutan.

El Paso was front and center at the festival. UTEP's close ties to Bhutanese architecture and culture were highlighted with a Bhutanese temple and traditional dance, music and song and heralded by our own President Diana Natalicio. Avila's Restaurant was dishing out Mexican food, reminding the rest of the world just what they were missing out on when they brave a taco in Georgia or an enchilada in Minnesota.

And then there were the mariachis.

One of the best parts about this Mayor Pro Tem business is that if the Mayor can't make it out, I have to go to D.C. to introduce Mariachis Los Arrieros to the rest of the world.

Which is what I did.

On a sticky hot evening in July, I stood before a mob of people from all around the world gathered under a big tent on the National Mall to tell them that I had no doubt that they were about to fall in love with El Paso.

Which is what they did.

They had no choice.

Mariachis Los Arrieros took the stage with a brash, full mariachi sound that left us breathless. Los Arrieros is a 15-member band of young men in their late 20s and early 30s. Juan Contreras, the musical director and one of the lead singers, mentioned to me that initially the Smithsonian folks only wanted him to bring out a handful of the group to save on costs. He wasn't having any of that. It was all or nothing. Their sound is big, and it needs all 15 guys to be able to deliver.

Most of the group comes out of Del Valle, Hanks, Ysleta and Bowie High School. Some of them came out of formal high school mariachi programs. Others were trained classically in orchestra or band and took to the mariachi sound later at UTEP. They came together in 1996 through the mariachi circuit of regional competitions and performances. Of the 15, 10 of them are educators in area high schools, teaching the next generation of mariachi performers. They are evangelical about the tradition of mariachi music. Every one of them that I talked to hammered home that their work as a group is more about passing on the tradition and love of the mariachi sound than it is about making money and being rock stars.

Even so, in the world of mariachis, Los Arrieros are rock stars. They have performed for thousands of people in Mexico and the United States. They are one of the top 10 mariachi bands in the world. In 1997, they won the Best Mariachi in Texas competition in front of a crowd of 80,000 people in the Houston Astrodome. In 2004, Los Arrieros became the premier mariachi group for the Chandler Mariachi Conference and will remain as the host mariachi group in the coming years. They have performed with extraordinary artists and groups including; Vicente Fernandez, Pepe Aguilar, Lucero, La Banda Recodo, Guadalupe Esparza, El Grupo Bronco, Marco Antonio Solis, El Buki, and Graciela Beltran.

They perform the songs that we all know and crave and ask for every chance we get: "Volver," "Cielito Lindo," "Guadalajara," the boleros, the rancheras. You name it, they got it. They will play a bolero like "Amor Eterno" and whether you understand the words or not, you are crushed by the familiar emotion of a yearning heart. But from the very start, Los Arrieros wanted to set themselves apart. This is where Juan Contreras comes in. As the musical director, he started digging up the past, listening to old records, finding songs that weren't part of the everyday repertoire of the mariachi. He found inspiration from old timers such as Juan Luis Guerra with his song "Ojalá que llueve café." It is more of a salsa song so he remade it in their own sound, adopting it to their instruments and rhythms and style. He has taken jazz standards such as "Moon Dance" and "Ojos Españolas," re-shaping the rhythms and the tempos, mariachi-style. And Juan has also written his own songs, such as "Llegaron los Arrieros," evolving a tradition so that it continues to have a place in the heart of our culture.

In D.C., Los Arrieros played 12 performances. Thousands of people from all over the world heard their music and heard them talk about their home in El Paso. Every time, the crowd went crazy nuts for Los Arrieros. They couldn't get enough. They loved Mariachis los Arrieros and because they loved Mariachi los Arrieros, they loved El Paso.

The Smithsonian had recruited official male dancers whose job it was to be the shills. They would eye a woman dancing about in her seat and invite her out for a dance with the hopes that a throng would follow. This was a new approach to me since Paseños are never shy about taking to the dance floor and don't need involved schemes to get the party started. The dance volunteers did not have to do much convincing with Mariachis los Arrieros on stage. Even with the bruising heat, people pushed themselves to the dance floor.

For several hours, Mariachis los Arrieros crooned love songs. They belted out boleros and rancheras, trading out singers, one a deep soulful base, another pitching a high note, holding it, holding it, holding it, until the crowd had to take a breath. They stomped the zapateado Veracruzana out on the dance floor, moving in and out of the audience, still playing their instruments. They played "Niño Perdido," one trumpet player the mom calling for her lost child, the other trumpet player the child hiding in the crowd, losing his mom. We all left exhausted, satisfied.

After the show, several El Paso expatriates came to me. They would hug me and kiss me and thank me. They looked home-sick and sad. They had forgotten what they were missing out on. Mariachi los Arrieros reminded them, and they missed their home.

This event and watching the world respond to Mariachi los Arrieros reminded me that as a city our most valuable assets are our art, our culture, our traditions and those, like Mariachi los Arrieros, who are willing to share what is special about us with the rest of the world.

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