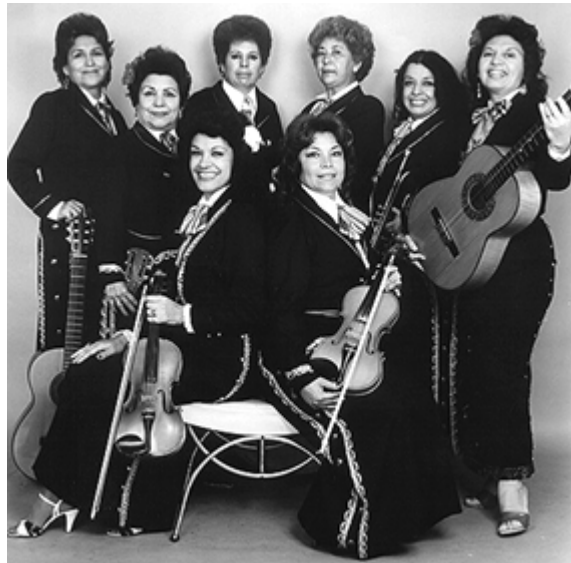


The Pioneer All-Female Mariachi Groups in the U.S. 1970s

Mariachi Las Generalas

Two pioneer all-female mariachi groups emerged in the 1970s in the United States: Mariachi Las Generalas in Los Angeles, California, and Mariachi Estrella in Topeka, Kansas. Both groups' earliest performance commitments were for weekly Catholic mass services.

Around 1976 in Los Angeles, María Elena Muñoz had a vision of forming an all-female mariachi group. She had never seen Rebecca Gonzales or me in the professional mariachi show circuit. According to Adela Valdez, a former member of Las Generalas (and Muñoz's *comadre*), her plan was to establish that women could *indeed* play mariachi music, just like men, and that one day, male mariachis themselves would be playing alongside her group. Later, many of the male mariachis who had voiced opposition to her group did in fact play alongside Mariachi Las Generalas.



Mariachi Las Generalas (c. 1976)

Muñoz called all of her friends to network and find female musicians. Adela Valdez was one of the first women to commit to the project. Muñoz approached Valdez, asking her, “Do you play an instrument?” Valdez answered, “One or two chords on the guitar. Why?” “That’s good enough!” responded Muñoz. Valdez was already recognized as a *ranchera* singer in their community. Eventually, there were enough women pledged to the project to begin rehearsals. Most were mothers or wives of mariachi musicians.

The group convinced Muñoz’s son, Juan Matías, to instruct them in his free time. “Matías,” as he was known in the Los Angeles mariachi circuit, was a professional

performer in some of the top show mariachis. In fact, he is credited by many mariachi musicians with introducing singing in English in mariachi shows. Some women, like the violinists and the guitarist, already knew how to play their instruments, while others were novices. Matías began by teaching them the mariachi mass (“La Misa Panamericana”), and within a few months they learned more of the standard repertoire that was required for the weddings and baptisms they were booking. Mariachi Las Generalas eventually performed for many local politicians’ events.

During the entire existence of this group, the notion of a woman performing mariachi music was strongly opposed. The husbands of many of the women in Mariachi Las Generalas told them that they were making fools of themselves. In fact, several of the women in the group were forced to leave because of the stress it was causing their marriages. One of the husbands broke a trumpet into pieces to show his disgust. Another broke a guitar. Muñoz continued to pursue her goal and looked for replacements for these members. Many times, members of Las Generalas were told that women did not belong in the mariachi environment. Muñoz would respond, “Mariachi music is not *just* cantina music.” She was adamant that the mariachi ambience did not have to reflect negative stereotypes. She wanted to prove everyone wrong by showing that women *could* do this.

Around 1983, several of the women's families began moving to Texas, and some considered retiring from the group. Muñoz felt that it was time to let go of Mariachi Las Generalas. By the early 1980s, many women were performing mariachi music in the Los Angeles area. Muñoz saw her vision become reality. “I feel a great deal of pride that Las Generalas may have motivated more women to play mariachi,” she says.

Mariachi Estrella of Topeka, Kansas



Mariachi Estrellas de Topeka, Teresa Cuevas, 3rd from right. (c. 1979)

I first met co-director of Mariachi Estrella, Teresa Cuevas of Topeka, Kansas, in the early 1980s. She was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant to study mariachi violin style. She preferred to study with a female mariachi. The grant stipulated that the Master Teacher be born into the musical tradition being studied. At that time,

there was no knowledge of the extensive history of women in mariachi music, but Cuevas seemed to understand the importance of establishing a female mariachi Master Teacher with the NEA. She insisted and successfully appointed me as her Master Teacher. Cuevas came to live with me in my home for about two months to study mariachi violin style.

In 1977, Teresa Cuevas and Consuelo Alcala formed Mariachi Estrella, comprised of six to seven women mariachi instrumentalists, to play for weekly Catholic masses. This decision was not influenced by Mariachi Las Generalas. It wasn't until a year or so later that they expanded their repertoire, including more popular mariachi music to contract engagements outside the church. According to Cuevas, who is now in her late 80s, the group became very popular and had just begun doing private gigs. It was during one of those first gigs at a New Year's party in a large hotel that Mariachi Estrella crossed an indoor upper-level ramp. It collapsed. Four of the six musicians fell to their deaths while Cuevas was trapped in the debris for several days.

Her determination and strong spirit got her through that tragic time, and she returned to her original quest to learn all she could about mariachi violin. Her dream was to pass this knowledge of cultural heritage on to her grandchildren and many others in her community. Now over 80 years old, Cuevas continues to perform with Mariachi Estrella, alongside women, men, and several of her grandchildren.



The 1980s: A stronger women's presence. Here shown left to right are Cindy Reifler, Laura Garciano, Kate Woods, and Barbara Pérez-Diaz. Dr. David Kilpatrick is seen to the right.