

The Pioneer Female Mariachis in the U.S. 1970's



Barbara Pérez-Díaz, of San Jose, California, started out in Mexican folk dancing with Los Lupeños de San Jose in 1969. She began playing the violin in mariachi in March of 1971 through the Community Services Program at San Jose City College. Los Lupeños' director, Susan Cashion, had strong ties with Mariachi Uclatlán at The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She recruited violinist Mark Folgelquist to develop a mariachi to accompany her dancers, and Mariachi Tequilatlán was born. Currently, Pérez-Díaz performs with Mariachi Monumental de América de Juan Reyes.

Around the same time, Rebecca Gonzales of San Jose was recruited from her youth symphony to play mariachi music through this same program. Her first working mariachi group was Mariachi Los Abajeños, with whom she began learning more extensive mariachi standards. She moved to Los Angeles to join Mariachi Uclatlán around January 1975 and eventually received an invitation by Natividad Cano (recently named NEA Master Artist and Heritage Fellow) to perform with Los Camperos de Nati Cano. Thus far, the earliest documentation of a female performing with a traditionally all-male show mariachi in the United States is violinist Rebecca Gonzales, the first "*Campera*" (the female version of a *Campero*).

In the United States, the 1970s was a decade of strong multicultural and women's movements. In 1975, I attended a class, "The Music of Mexico," at UCSC, taught by Dr. David Kilpatrick. Having studied classical music all my life, I had planned to graduate as a classical music major. It was not in my plans to study anything else. For some reason, I wound up in that classroom, not knowing how important this event would be in my future. That first day, I remained in the classroom long after everyone had left—I was captivated after hearing traditional Mexican music for the first time. While I didn't make a conscious decision to devote my life to becoming a mariachi musician because of any multicultural or women's movement, it's possible that because of these movements I didn't fear where my heart wanted to take me, which was to become a mariachi performer. I chose to join Kilpatrick's working mariachi, Mariachi Santa Cruz. Many tried to convince me that I was making a wrong choice; why would a classically trained violinist want to perform "bar" music? I had to have been crazy!



Laura Garciacano (left) in one of the earliest performances with Mariachi Santa Cruz. Barbara Pérez-Díaz on right. (1975)

My own experience with Mariachi Santa Cruz led to an invitation in 1978 to work with a group in Los Angeles, Mariachi Uclatlán de Mark Fogelquist. It wasn't until late 1979 that Pedro Rey invited me to rehearse with the Mariachi Los Galleros. I then became their first female member. I was given six months to learn their standard show repertoire and learned it in three! Soon, I became section leader, meaning that the male violinists had to follow *me*! You can imagine the uproar. There was even a protest, which quickly got a member of the group fired. Fortunately, by the time I became a first violinist for Mariachi Sol de México in 1986, many more female mariachis had emerged and revolts had diminished. Later, I had the opportunity to learn about musical directorship as an original member of the Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles (1994). Today, I continue to perform with local mariachi groups each weekend. Groups are hired for all sorts of celebrations, including birthday and *quinceañeras* parties, weddings, anniversaries, serenades, and of course, funerals. I also am the musical director and a violinist with Mariachi Mujer 2000, a dynamic all-female show mariachi.

Another female mariachi pioneer of the time, Kate Woods of San Jose, began playing with the San Jose Youth Symphony and eventually joined Los Lupeños as a violinist. She later played mariachi violin with many local groups and is probably the first woman (along with Rose Gonzales, Rebecca's sister) to work many of the San Francisco and Monterey Bay area "hard core" bars as an experienced *talón* player. *Talón* players have the challenging task of performing for money at different cantinas. In order to fulfill song requests, these players must have an extensive repertoire. Woods had just that, along with the quality of being a great *segundera*, or second voice. Woods and Gonzalez also played with Mariachi Los Rancheros de Juan Fernández. Kate no longer performs mariachi music.

Rebecca Gonzales and I have discovered many parallel experiences as pioneer mariachi women. We were both classically trained, playing the youth symphony circuit for many years. She was raised in San Jose area, and I in nearby Watsonville. We both encountered UCLA ethnomusicologists who introduced us to mariachi music (Mark Fogelquist and David Kilpatrick, respectively). We both decided that despite opposition, often from our own families, sometimes

from cultural stereotypes, and mostly from the male mariachi musicians themselves, *we were going to be mariachi musicians*. Much like the Mexico City *pioneras* and my colleagues of the 1970s, we were all motivated by our love for mariachi performance. It was this passion that inspired us to take on the mariachi world.