

## **The Sound of Home: Mariachi in Los Angeles**

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Originating in 19th-century western Mexico, mariachi has become one of the most recognizable expressions of Mexican cultural heritage. Traditionally performed by ensembles with guitars, violins, trumpets, and vocal harmonies, mariachi music serves not only as entertainment but also as a symbol of community, festivity, and collective identity. In recent decades, mariachi has expanded far beyond Mexico's borders, becoming a living tradition throughout the Mexican diaspora. Today, Los Angeles is one of the largest hubs of mariachi music outside Mexico, with ensembles performing in schools, plazas, and community celebrations across the city.

My research examined the practice of mariachi in Los Angeles, focusing on how it reflects broader issues of cultural identity, migration, and community belonging. Whereas mariachi in Mexico is deeply tied to national tradition, mariachi in Los Angeles often works as a marker of Latino identity more broadly, including for musicians who may not have been born in Mexico and, in some cases, do not speak Spanish. To better understand this complexity, I conducted interviews with mariachi musicians, students, educators, and seamstresses who create traditional performance attire. I also observed performances in public spaces, as well as the work of student ensembles, to document how mariachi is taught, adapted, and shared across generations. In addition to these methods, I participated directly by joining a mariachi group during the summer, attending rehearsals, and playing at gigs. This immersive involvement not only gave me firsthand insight into the musical and social dynamics of performance but also allowed me to use my own experience as a form of data, deepening my understanding of the community practices I was studying.

While mariachi in Los Angeles maintains many traditional elements, I found that it also reflects important changes shaped by migration and cultural exchange. One prominent theme concerns gender and representation: although mariachi is historically male-dominated, Los Angeles has seen the rise of all-female ensembles and an increase in overall participation by women, challenging long-standing cultural norms. Another theme is cultural hybridization: young musicians often use mariachi to connect with Mexican heritage while also articulating a broader Latino identity, even when their personal ties to Mexico are indirect. I also observed that mariachi functions as a tool of community-building, creating spaces where intergenerational and intercultural bonds can develop, from school programs to neighborhood plazas.

Through this project, I gained a deeper appreciation for mariachi not simply as music but as a social practice that strengthens belonging, preserves tradition, and fosters innovation. My findings suggest that mariachi in Los Angeles should be understood as both rooted in Mexican heritage and transformed by its U.S. context, reflecting the diverse experiences of Latino communities. Looking ahead, I plan to continue analyzing my interview materials, field notes, and personal experiences as part of my honors project. I also hope to attend the Al Calor del Mariachi Festival, organized by Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán in Mexico this October, to gain comparative insights between mariachi traditions in Mexico and those in Los Angeles.

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