

**“Las Generalas:
Origins of Women’s Participation in Mariachi and
The Cultural and Transnational Implications.”**

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Abstract:

The present essay focuses on *Las Generalas*, the first U.S. based all-female mariachi band. Two of the original members, María Elena Muñoz (founder and vihuelist) and Adela Valdez (guitarist), recounted for the author the story of their personal journey and relate the history of the group from its initiation in 1976 to its final days. By basing the major research of this investigation on interviews with actual participants the article hopes to achieve a history that conveys not only the transnational aspect of folk music and nationalism, nor simply its transcultural implications vis-à-vis gender politics, but also hopes to portray vividly what the access to a music so highly charged with nationalism, traditionalism, and machismo has meant in the daily lives of the female participants who have slowly and steadily been changing the face of the reflection which most represents the national image of Mexico to its nation and to the world.

This paper is also part of a wider research that explores the period of women’s initial entry into the mariachi workforce through oral histories of two sets of female mariachi performers in California during the 1970s: the before mentioned *Las Generalas*, and four women from Northern California (Barbara Pérez-Díaz, Rebeca Gonzales, Kate Woods, Laura Sobrino), who were the first women to participate in and continue to perform mariachi music at a professional level.

Keywords:

Female Mariachi, Women in Mariachi, History of Mariachi in California, *Las Generalas*, María Elena Muñoz, Adela Valdez

Resumen:

Este ensayo se enfoca en el primer grupo musical de mujeres mariachi en los EEUU. Dos de sus miembros originales, María Elena Muñoz (fundadora y vihuelista) y Adela Valdez (guitarrista), relatan a la autora del artículo la historia de su particular periplo y el del grupo desde sus inicios en 1976 hasta su final. Aunque la investigación se basa en entrevistas con los participantes reales, su intención es lograr hacer una historia que transmita no solo los aspectos transnacionales de la música folklórica y el nacionalismo, ni simplemente sus implicaciones transculturales en relación a las políticas de género, sino que aspira a retratar vívidamente lo que ha significado en la vida diaria de las mujeres participantes el acceso a una música tan fuertemente cargada de nacionalismo, tradicionalismo y machismo. Estas mujeres lenta y constantemente han ido cambiando la cara de aquello que más representa la imagen de México ante el mundo y el propio país.

Este artículo también hace parte de una investigación sobre el periodo inicial en el que las mujeres entran al mariachi mediante los relatos orales de dos grupos femeninos de mariachi en la California de los años

setenta: las ya mencionadas Generalas y cuatro mujeres del Norte de California (Bárbara Pérez Díaz, Rebeca Gonzales, Kate Woods, Laura Sobrino), que fueron las primeras que participaron en la música de mariachi y lo siguieron haciendo a nivel profesional.

Palabras clave:

Mariachi femenino/femenil, mujeres y mariachi, Historia del mariachi en California, *Las Generalas* María Elena Muñoz, Adela Valdez.

1. Introduction

Mariachi music is inextricably linked to the national identity of Mexico. Although the image of the male wearing a tight fitting black suit adorned with silver buttons has remained synonymous throughout the world with Mexican culture, the reality has been changing. Non-traditional performers' involvement has increased, most notably that of women. This paper presents a study that is part of a wider investigation, which explores the period of women's initial entry into the mariachi workforce through oral histories of two sets of female mariachi performers in California during the 1970s. Two members of *Las Generalas*, María Elena Muñoz y Adela Valdez, the first U.S. based all-female band, and four women from Northern California (Barbara Pérez-Díaz, Rebeca Gonzales, Kate Woods and Laura Sobrino), who were the first women to participate in and continue to perform mariachi music at a professional level, share in-depth descriptions of their experiences during this time which for many brought extreme cultural upheaval. The present essay focuses on *Las Generalas*, although I consider the oral histories of these six women convey the paradigm of the era of the 1970s.

The main objective of my research is to inform on the humble beginnings of women's participation in the Mariachi World, examine the commonalities that existed in the pioneer female performers' family life and social experiences and to compare and contrast those aspects within the subsets of female participants. To limit the scope of this undertaking, I have concentrated on the area of California. This choice of area is appropriate since most of the pioneer mariachi women in the United States started in northern California, and Los Angeles in Southern California is considered to be the world's leading cultural center of mariachi outside of Mexico. The sources for information about mariachi have been growing exponentially since the beginning of the new millennium, including sources that include women. This document will add to the still limited written material on women in mariachi. My own personal observations and experiences will be included as well, since I am a woman who has been playing mariachi professionally in California since 1983.

Methodology

The methods for research in this project are:

- extensive background reading in related fields of Women's Studies, Chicano Studies, Anthropology, Gender Studies, History and all published literature on mariachi music.

- digitally recorded interviews with key participant informants
- my own personal experience as a professional woman mariachi since 1983

By basing the major research of this investigation on interviews with actual participants I hope to achieve a history that conveys not only the transnational aspect of folk music and nationalism, nor simply its transcultural implications vis-à-vis gender politics, but also hope to portray vividly what the access to a music so highly charged with nationalism, traditionalism, and machismo has meant in the daily lives of the female participants who have slowly and steadily been changing the face of the reflection which most represents the national image of Mexico to its nation and to the world.

Personal Involvement

In 1980 when I first passed through Mexico, hitch-hiking, walking, taking the bus or the train, third class, what impressed me was not the music: in fact I cannot remember having heard any. The sound of nature and the day itself are what is implanted in my memory, along with the penetrating warmth of the near tropical sun; the neonbright colors of the clothing, the buildings, the foliage, colors my sister describes as “not found in nature”; the quietness of the *pueblos*; the smell of the plant-life, the food, the *polvo* [dust] that our feet kicked up and that clung to us on our journeys. Even passing through Mexico’s capital city, *Distrito Federal*, where there was an overwhelming bustle of people and vehicles and, oddly enough, passing through the famous Garibaldi Square, the largest open market for mariachis in the world, I don’t recall having seen a musician or having heard music. Nevertheless, there must be some truth in the quote attributed to Tina Modotti, “*Quien respire el polvo de México no encontrará paz en otro lugar.*” [Whoever breathes the dust of Mexico will not find peace in any other place], as my life and my music were forever changed by this experience and the deep appreciation I acquired for Mexico and her culture.

As a white, blonde, blue-eyed Jewish classically trained female violinist from Upstate New York the likelihood of my becoming a mariachi in the 1980s was infinitesimal. I did not grow up with this music and my first contact with Mexico as described above did not include exposure to it. In my ken, our neighboring country was Canada. I never thought about Mexico, chose French over Spanish as my language of study in high school and probably never saw a Mexican until I was in California in my twenties. Although I had loved being in Mexico, my path to entrance in the mariachi profession was more of an unscheduled detour, an accident, a stumble, a quirk of fate that led me to this life. I was enrolled at the University of California at Santa Cruz and was honest with my advisor that I wanted some easy classes so I could devote more time to practicing my instrument. If I had not already played violin and had not been at UCSC or had not had that conversation with my advisor or had not had the good fortune to have as my advisor David Kilpatrick, the ethnomusicologist on campus and the director of the mariachi, I probably would never have found my way to this world. Once the door was opened, I stayed.

With my extensive and intensive classical training, the notes to the songs came easily to me, I could almost predict what would come next and I learned and memorized the famous "Son de La Negra"⁽¹⁾ in about ten minutes. The notes were easy to capture; the style was more elusive. And the culture? I was so far out of the loop I didn't even know there was a loop. I played mariachi music because I loved the music. It spoke to a very special place in my heart. But when it came time for me to choose between classical and mariachi, I chose mariachi not because of a greater love for the music, but rather for the performance practice, the cultural aspect of the performance that seemed a better fit to my personality. Here was a genre in which my conversation with my audience was immediate and literal! The audience, unlike the symphony patrons, actually spoke to me! "Hey, *guerita!* You guys gonna play 'El Rey?'" [Hey, Blondie! Are you going to play *The King?*]⁽²⁾ "*Ven conmigo, guerita! Te presento con mi abuela.*" [Come with me, Blondie, I want you to meet my grandmother].

Over time I learned the language, became familiar with the culture as it pertains to those from Mexico and those whose families are from Mexico, and I became a part of the sub-culture that is Mariachi.⁽³⁾ I started out in a student University group playing *chambas*⁽⁴⁾, formed a student working group, played in a professional working group with restaurant *plantas*⁽⁵⁾, played in a professional *al talon* group⁽⁶⁾, joined a show group whose goal was to be true to the tradition of mariachi⁽⁷⁾ and have also played in a show group known for its non-mariachi/neo-mariachi sound, song selection and style⁽⁸⁾. I started in a University school setting⁽⁹⁾, yet had most of my Mariachi training in the apprenticeship style, learning from more experienced players on the job⁽¹⁰⁾. I have played in bars without floors, had performances broadcast to audiences worldwide⁽¹¹⁾,

¹ This song is considered to be most representative of mariachi music to the world and to Mexican nationals as well.

² A popular song composed by the late great Jose Alfredo Jiménez and a staple of the Mariachi repertory.

³ Both Steven Joseph Loza ("Musical Aesthetics and Multiculturalism in Los Angeles) and Russell Rodriguez ("The Legitimization of Mariachi) refer to the subculture of mariachi, and Rodriguez and Daniel Sheehy (*Mariachi Music in America*) refer to "the mariachi lifestyle".

⁴ "*Chamba*" is a slang word for "work". In the mariachi context a "*chamba*" is a hired out job, distinct from the steady work of a *planta* or the presentation of a show.

⁵ "*Planta*" is the word used to describe a steady place of work. It generally indicates that the establishment pays for the music, but it can also be a place to which the mariachi has exclusivity, does not have to share with any other competing bands, and still works on a pay-per-song basis.

⁶ *Talon*: heel or claw. Traditionally this is walking from bar to bar looking for clients who will hire the group for a pre-set price per song. This is the method that I played. Currently this word is used to mean pay per song work, not necessarily changing locations.

⁷ *Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles*, the first all-female show mariachi of international importance in the United States.

⁸ Grammy winning *Mariachi Divas*.

⁹ University of California at Santa Cruz.

¹⁰ Russell Rodriguez goes into detail about the differences between these two methods of learning (10-14).

¹¹ Kodak Theater Chinese New Year 2007 Concert, which not only had a filled to capacity house but was broadcast to the entire Chinese speaking population worldwide.

have accompanied famous artists(12¹²), performed for famous artists(13¹³), performed on stage in front of crowds of thousands with my group as the headliner alone and also with the best mariachis in the world.(14¹⁴)

This, briefly, is my story of entry into this world. Other women entered before me. Many have entered since. Each of the women who were playing prior to my entry have expressed that they feel as if it were some twist of fate that brought them to this profession, just as I do. But, many women who started out did not continue. When we consider the ones that did make mariachi music not just their profession but their life it is hard not to ponder, why? Are we all products of some cosmic joke or is there some commonality between us? Why these women? Why this time?

Review of Literature

The academic writing that is closest to my research topic is that of Russell Rodriguez in his 2006 dissertation *Cultural Production, Legitimation and the Politics of Aesthetics: Mariachi Transmission, Practice and Performance in the United States*, presented for his Doctorate of Philosophy in Anthropology from the University of California at Santa Cruz. Rodriguez states that his work “explicate[s] the developments and transformations this musical form [Mariachi] has endured due to its presence in new public spaces and the participation of new practitioners who diverge from the Mexicano working-class masculinity that signifies the ‘traditional’ mariachi musician.” (Rodriguez vii) The research examines the change from a mentor/apprentice system of learning to that of school training, the influence of the mariachi festivals and the school programs in the inclusion of non-male non-Mexican participants in addition to examining the effect these have had on performance practice, lyric content, style, repertoire choice, and also includes the prevailing discourses on what the “authentic” or “traditional” mariachi entails. He examines these changes and reactions to them from his experiences as a working mariachi in Northern and Southern California, Texas, Puerto Rico and in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. He also examines the interconnectedness of the mariachi culture across borders. Rodriguez’ focus, although much broader and more inclusive, shares the same premise as mine, that the “face” of mariachi is changing in the United States and that much of the change stems from the legitimization of the genre through its

¹² Marc Antonio Solis” *El Bukí*”, Pablo Montero, Pedro Fernández, Miguel Aceves Mejía, Lalo Guerrero, Vicki Carr.

¹³ Most notably, Jack Nicholson and Tom Petty, Ravi Shankar and George Harrison.

¹⁴ *Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles* (“the Queen of the Angels” and also the Original name of the City of Los Angeles), the first all-female show group in the United States performed many concerts in large venues in which the group was the featured or only artist. Many times with *Mariachi Reyna* I have shared the stage with *Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán*, *Mariachi de America de Jesús Rodríguez de Hajar*, *Mariachi Los Galleros de Pedro Rey*, *Mariachi Sol de México*, *Mariachi Cobre* and *Mariachi Los Camperos*, in addition to others. I have also played in concerts with *Mariachi Divas* where they were the only artists on the venue.

incorporation in the school system.(15¹⁵) His discussion of women in mariachi is sensitive and thoughtful. He also clearly states that this is a topic begging for more research.

In addition to hard material written on mariachi, Laura Sobrino has a website dedicated exclusively to anything and everything mariachi, from whence she sells her musical transcriptions of mariachi songs, but which also hosts a section on the history of women in mariachi (www.Mariachipublishing.com). This is the most in depth history on women in mariachi compiled anywhere. The history is divided into decades of women's participation and includes a section on women's "trajes" or "suits" and another called "Unique Mujeres [women] in Mariachi", where she includes brief biographies of some of the pioneer women of mariachi in the United States.(16¹⁶)

Women in Mariachi

Although scholars had included the regional music of the mariachi in their books of *folklor Mexicano* and in collections of folk music,(17¹⁷) serious study of the mariachi, its history and social context, was not part of the literature prior to the 1970s, when the mariachi began to be a theme for theses and dissertations. It was during this same time that women began playing professionally in mariachis in the United States, specifically in California.

Whereas the decade of the 70s sparked an interest in mariachi in academia and saw the first women joining professional mariachi bands, it was not until the 1990s that both of these processes became widespread in the United States. During the interim, women were continuing to join mostly male family groups and were integrating into school groups that often continued after graduation. The introduction of mariachi classes to public school curricula in many areas and extra-curricular mariachi classes offered by city recreation programs and non-profit groups allowed for the indoctrination of girls to the music of mariachi in numbers previously unattained and unimagined. During the 1990s, the all-female mariachi became popular in the Southwest United States, particularly in Los Angeles, California, one of the major centers of mariachi music worldwide.

The phenomenon of the all-female mariachi was not new. Mexico had seen a few all-girl bands come and go from the 1940s through the 1980s, about one per decade (www.Mariachipublishing.com), and in the 1990s the all-girl group from Mexico City, *Las Perlitas Tapatías*, set the stage and actually ignited the fire for the all-female mariachi groups that spread throughout the United States. The first all-female mariachi

¹⁵ It is interesting to me that Russell Rodriguez and I share a similar focus for our works. We worked together for many years in Northern California. I am mentioned in his dissertation.

¹⁶ Since this is not an academic piece, no sources or references are given for any of the information presented, though I have no reason to doubt their authenticity.

¹⁷ Kendrick (*Regional Dances of Mexico*), Mendoza (*Panorama de la música tradicional de México*), Mooney (*Mexican Folk Dances For American Schools*).

show group of international stature in the United States, *Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles*, debuted in 1994 in Los Angeles. This group was made up of women who had very dissimilar backgrounds and musical training, but all had previous experience playing in mixed gender mariachis(18¹⁸). In sharp contrast to this, in 1976 the first all-female mariachi was formed in the United States, a group called “*Las Generales*”(19¹⁹). Located in Los Angeles, this group was started by the mother of and the wife of professional mariachis.(20²⁰) Although the known history of women in mariachi covers a time span of over 60 years and the mariachi has been a subject of serious academic research for over 30 years, it has not been until very recently that women have been included in these histories. The female presence has been so absent that in none of the works prior to the 1990s has gender even been considered. There is no mention that the mariachis are men and that there were no women. The male gender is a given.

Starting in the 1990s, essentially after the success of *Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles*, the inclusion of women, even if only in passing, has been part of many, but not all discussions of Mariachi(21²¹). Given the scant information on mariachi that was generally available, the lack of focus on women in Mariachi is understandable. The inclusion of some reference to female musicians or all female groups in ever increasing numbers of writings on the mariachi is a testimony to the permanent presence of women in this previously exclusively male cultural tradition. The literature on mariachi in general, although increasing in volume and scope, is still scant and women’s participation is only one aspect of this genre whose discussion needs to be amplified.

Women have started to fill in the gaps in this area. Dr. Leonor Xochitl Pérez and Laura Sobrino have a website dedicated to women in Mariachi which includes an extensive photo-montage of the history of women accompanied by well researched capsulated information.(22²²) Women are beginning to appear in serious discussion of mariachi. Although mention of women’s presence has become more common, an analysis of root causes for participation has not been considered, especially in the context of the transnationalism of culture and nationalism and gender identity.

My hope in writing about this investigation is, while documenting women’s participation in mariachi, to uncover the similarities among the women who were the pioneers in the mariachi industry and discover what the catalysts for their participation were. Why these women? Why this time? The Chicano movement and the feminist movement have been

¹⁸ Both Laura Sobrino and I were original members of this group.

¹⁹ There is evidence pointing to another all-female group which may have slightly pre-dated *Las Generales*, but for the purposes of my thesis the exactitude of who was first is inconsequential.

²⁰ Although in the *Mariachi Publishing* website it is stated that the group was “composed of mothers and wives of professional male mariachi musicians.” in my interviews with these two founders they indicated that they were the only ones with any previous connection to mariachis.

²¹ Sheehy (“Mexican Mariachi Music” and *Mariachi Music in America*); Perez (“Transgressing the Taboo”); Jáquez (“El Mariachi: Musical Repertoire as Sociocultural Investment.”), Jáuregui (*El Mariachi: Símbolo Musical de México*); Rodriguez (“The Legitimization of Mariachi).

²² www.sobrino.net. Or mariachipublishing.com or www. Mariachi4u.com.

mentioned as influences for women's participation at this time, but, that would seem to indicate that a larger group of women, perhaps even constituting a sub-movement, should have been spurred to participation. Through interviews with the women in question I will reveal the family influences such as immigration length and place of origin, education, music in the home, economic status, political participation and acculturation that may have been shared between these women and had influence upon their entry into mariachi.

In addition, I add more information linking these women's participation in the mariachi to their national and cultural identities. Although many of the women who became involved with the mariachi early on were non-Hispanic, does the simple act of involvement in mariachi imply a relation to Mexican nationalism? This project will explore the relation that the non-Hispanic musician felt as compared to those of Mexican descent. Did the mariachi consciously represent anything related to a feeling of connectedness to Mexico and how was this manifested as compared to the Mexican participants? What role did/does the mariachi play in Hispanic women's awakening/growing ethnic identity?

Looking at the initial impetus for participation may demonstrate the transnational influence upon the mariachi. The so-called "pioneer women" were all initially recruited by white academicians. Does this fact alone imply a transnational impulsion of the culture prior to any gender shift?

This essay will also address gender roles and their embeddedness in national mythologies. To what extent was "*lo mexicana*" as exemplified in machismo, present in these women's lives prior to their mariachi experience and during their careers within the mariachi? Did this change over time? What image did the women hope to portray within the group: Very feminine? Very tough? *Compañera*(²³)? One of the guys? What did the women perceive the attitudes of the male musicians with whom they worked to be toward them and how were these manifested? How did the women internalize and respond to these perceived attitudes?

As a means of comparison, I interviewed the two founders of Mariachi *Las Generales*, María Elena Muñoz, the mother of a mariachi and Adela Valdez the wife of a mariachi. Were the motivations of the women in this all-female group different from those of the "girls" who initially started working in male groups? Were these women who were Mexican born influenced by United States culture to pursue this interest? Was it or was it not supported by their husbands? What was their connection with national identity and gender awareness? How were their backgrounds similar to each other and what differences existed?

2 . Las Generales

²³ "*Compañera*" is a fellow, in this case because of the final "a" female, worker.

Traditionally, the Mariachi has been an exclusive male club to which only Mexican nationals were invited. But women have been knocking on this door since the early 1940s when novelty all-women groups first appeared in Mexico City. The first all-female mariachi in the United States was formed in Los Angeles by women who had access to this club through the service entrance. A mother of one mariachi and the wife of another dared to enter the world of Mariachi quietly and without pretense by creating their own group, Mariachi *Las Generalas* in 1976. Two of the original members, Maria Elena Muñoz (founder and vihuelist) and Adela Valdez (guitarist), recounted for me the story of their personal journey and relate the history of the group from its initiation in 1976 to its final days.

Because *Las Generalas* was started during a time of unrest and social change for minorities and women, these interviews also explored what contribution, if any, the Chicano Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement made towards the initial formation of the group. The very existence of a working, all-female band challenged the traditional mores for women's role in society. The fact that this band was a Mariachi, the ensemble that plays the national music which represents Mexico throughout the world and is also characterized by its portrayal of machismo, tested the very fiber of "Mexicanismo", or Mexican Identity. As such, this group, while embracing the music and thus the culture of Mexico, at the same time was breaking Mexican societal expectations and exhibiting an assimilation of the emerging way of life in the United States. The stories of these women reveal the transnational nature of these women's lives and choices and the consequences and benefits of their decisions and actions. This story, which is their story, is a page in the larger story of the changing role of women in the United States, and is also the beginning of the end for male exclusivity in the Mariachi Club.

María Elena Muñoz(24²⁴)

Born in 1924 in Vista Hermosa, Michoacán, María Elena was the oldest of four children. Her father and all his brothers were mariachi musicians, and from an early age this traditional music of Mexico was her passion. When a volcano erupted and spread ashes over a nearby town(25²⁵), the inhabitants moved out while the dust settled. And to María Elena's town came the Mendoza family, whose sons were to become "*Los Tariácuri*"(26²⁶) and whose daughter Amalia was to become one of the all-time legendary female ranchera singers. The Mendoza children treated her as another sibling. Amalia and María Elena would sing at the school fiestas while the brothers Juan and José accompanied them on the guitar.

²⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes and personal information in the section are from this interview; Muñoz, María Elena. Founder of all-female mariachi *Las Generalas*. Translations are mine.

²⁵ María Elena names the town as San Juan del Río, but the Mendoza biography on Wikipedia mentions San Juan Huétamo as their native town. ("Los Tariacuri and Amalia Mendoza")

²⁶ The word the local indigenous Purépecha used for their king. Amalia was later to be known as "La Tariácuri". ("Amalia Mendoza")

When she was nine, María Elena's grandmother took her to enter a singing contest. There, along with a young man named Manolo Muñoz(27²⁷), she was chosen to tour with a young singer just starting out in his career, Pedro Infante. María Elena went to Guadalajara, where they performed in the *Teatro Degollado*, working with "Tata Nacho"(28²⁸), whom she struggled to please in the interpretation of a particular *corrido*. She toured with Pedro Infante throughout Michoacán and into the United States. During this time Pedro Infante dubbed her "*La Rosa Michoacana*" (The Rose from Michoacán). In Los Angeles, the *Million Dollar Theater* was "American" then(29²⁹); the theater where the Mexican artists performed was *The Mason Theater*(30³⁰) across the street and the troupe came to perform there three times during the course of the tour.

Later on, María Elena traveled performing with her family. She refers to her father as the artist behind the scenes. "*Mi 'apa era el artista atrás del telón. El tocaba la guitarra. Yo cantaba y el y mis tíos tocaban las guitarras.*" (My Dad was the man behind the curtain. He played the guitar. I sang and he and my uncles played the guitars.)

He was always there, "behind the curtain", playing mariachi and supporting her musical career. However, when María Elena's paternal grandmother became ill, her father came to her to send her home to Mexico. "*Mi abuela se enfermó y me mandaron p'atrás a cuidarlo. Y uno hace lo que le piden los padres.*" (My grandmother got sick and so they sent me back to take care of her. And one does what one's parents ask.) She was to be the one to stay with her *abuela* and take care of her. In those times, one just did as one's parents said and so that was the end of that. But before that happened, her uncles had been the ones to bring Mexican radio to the Los Angeles area. They had the radio show "*Los Madrugadores*" (The Early Birds) at four thirty in the morning and María Elena would go to the station to sing live on the air while her *tíos* (uncles) accompanied her on the guitar.

After María Elena married, she no longer toured or sang professionally. Sometimes, during the time she was married, she would sing in the church or for special functions, but only with her husband's permission. Her husband allowed her to continue with some engagements, but now she was "very busy with another life". "*Cambia tu vida cuando tu eres madre. Eres madre, ya tienes una responsabilidad a tus hijos y no*

²⁷ The famous singer Manolo Muñoz was born in 1941, so either it is a different singer with the same name or María Elena has incorrectly identified the singer with whom she toured. ("Manolo Muñoz")

²⁸ Ignacio Fernández Esperón. Mexican composer. 1892-1968. The words for the *corrido* were "*Felipe fue un desgraciado*" and the *maestro* wanted her to say, "*Jelipe fue un desgraciado*", the way the rural folk might.

²⁹ *The Million Dollar* 307 S. Broadway in downtown Los Angeles was one of the first movie palaces built in the United States. Originally owned by Charles Grauman, it was sold to Frank Fouce, a pioneer of Spanish entertainment in the United States, in 1949. Many big name artists appeared there since. ("Million Dollar Theater").

³⁰ Broadway. Opened in 1903 as the *Mason Opera House*. Operated for years by Frank Fouce showing Mexican films as Fouce's *Mason Theatre*. It was demolished in 1955 or 56. ("Downtown's Historic Movie Palaces and Legitimate Theatres")

puedes andar por allá y por acá.” (Your world changes when you are a mother. You have responsibilities to your children – you can’t be running around). She had a daughter and they adopted a son. When her husband died, she was thirty-six years old.

María Elena worked for the El Monte police department as a gang liaison. She had her son studying music and her daughter dancing in the *ballet folklórico*(31³¹). Because of her position, she was able to see the need for outreach to the Hispanic community. She ran fundraisers to help the kids coming out of the probation camps, so that they would have clothes and shoes and the necessities they needed to get by, and helped out on any occasion where she saw the need. She only organized the events, refusing to touch any of the money: a struggling single mother, she did not want to be accused if anything was missing.

María Elena was made director of the then recently opened El Monte Multi-Service Center. At the police department supervisor’s request, she only worked at this new job two days a week so that she could continue working with the police. In El Monte she arranged for a program to teach the women on welfare to become seamstresses and placed them in jobs in factories. She implemented an immigration program, insisting to the officers that her applicants’ paperwork be reviewed and not swept under the carpet. She had eight secretaries working under her and successfully helped over 5,000 people through the immigration process. She was also going to school at the time, studying psychiatry at UCLA. They hired her to work as a psychiatrist for them.(32³²) She wanted “to turn [herself] into an octopus to be able to help everyone”.

While she was working in this position, María Elena frequently overheard her colleagues refer to mariachi music in derogatory terms.

Oía la gente decir que la música del mariachi era de borrachos, es para cantinas, y a mi me molestaba TANTO eso, porque toda la gente de mi padre fue mariachis y son mariachi y en mi corazón está esa música. Me dolía TANTO que [lo] dijeron, poniendo mi música de alteo en los pies. Me dolía. Voy a cambiar la ideología de esa gente. Voy a darles a saber. (I would hear people say that mariachi music was for drunks and for the bars, and that bothered me SO MUCH because, as all my family on my father’s side were mariachis and are mariachi(s) and this music is in my heart, it hurt me SO MUCH that they would say that, throwing the music I held so highly to the ground. I am going to change their ideology. I will show them.)

³¹ Commonly known as Mexican Folk dance, the *ballet folklórico* is a theatrical, choreographed style of the traditional Mexican dances. This style was developed by Amalia Hernández in the 1950s.

³² It is unclear if “they” were the police or the Welfare Office, but more likely the Welfare Office, Social Services.

It hurt her to hear people talking so poorly about the music that she loved – her music. She wanted to change their way of thinking, their “ideology”. She resolved to show them that they were wrong.

Adelita Valdez(33³³)

Born in Guanajuato, Mexico, Adela fell in love with mariachi at an early age. She was known for her singing and appeared publicly as a *ranchera* singer since the age of seven. Adela had two brothers and was the oldest of the three. Her siblings did not share her passion, nor did other members of her immediate family. Her uncles played stand-up bass and trumpet in an ‘*orquesta*’. (34³⁴) Although they enjoyed mariachi music and had the radio on at all times, her family boasted no mariachi musicians. Her father was adamant that no child of his would be a singer. But her mother, well, she supported her daughter’s dream.

Y yo podía haber hecho algo de lo que a mi me gustaba pero mi papá... (pausa) (casi un suspiro)... Mi ‘amá...sii... (callada y tierna, casi como una oración). [And I could have done something with that which I enjoyed but my Father... (Pause) (Almost a sigh)...My Mom ... yeees... (Soft and tender, almost like a prayer).](35³⁵)

When the local radio stations held the *aficionados* [amateur contests] on Sundays, Adela’s mother would let her go, sending the other children along with her. When her father asked for her, Adela’s mother would say that the children had gone to church.

Yo iba a concursar en los concursos de radio. Mi ‘amá me decía que no dijera a mi Papá. Mi Papá se levantaba y preguntaba, porque yo era la preferida, ‘¿Dónde está la niña?’ ‘Se fue a la iglesia’ Un día mi Mamá me quería oír en el radio y lo puso y estaba yo ahí cantando...y se enojó con ella ! ‘¿Por qué la dejas ir?!’ Yo no quiero artistas en mi casa !!!’ (I would go to compete in the radio station’s contests. My mom would tell me not to tell my dad. My dad would get up and ask, because I was his favorite, ‘Where is the girl?’ ‘She went to the church’. One day my mother decided she wanted to hear me on the radio and she turned it on and there I was singing...and he got angry at her! ‘Why do you let her go? I don’t want artists in my house!’”)

³³ All quotes and information in this section are from this interview: Valdez, Adela. Mariachi Pioneer Woman, interview by author, 16 February 2011. Translations are also mine

³⁴ Dance band or symphonic *orquesta*, but most likely the dance band. *Orquesta* would more commonly be referred to as “*Sinfónica*”.

³⁵ I tried to capture the wonderful sentiment that Adela expressed without words here. She was not mad at her Father, maybe a little disappointed in the missed opportunities, but her gratitude to her mother was immense

Later, the parents divorced and he had ten more children with his new wife. Adela performed with a trio starting from when she was a young girl. She would perform at every opportunity. Although her father and all her siblings completed their education, she did not. Her joy and passion was the mariachi music. They moved to the border town of Mexicali and she would always wait for the chance to go hear the mariachis play in the *placita* (town square) and to sing with them. She studied the guitar some, but didn't really apply herself too much. What she really loved was to sing. Adela developed quite an extensive repertoire. When her family crossed over into the United States, she was still of school age. But she didn't go because she was too busy following the mariachis around. And when she got married at the age of fourteen school was completely forgotten.

Cuando vine a los Estados Unidos estaba de edad para entrar a la escuela, pero nunca lo hice por andar atrás de los mariachis. En mi pueblo se acostumbraba que el mariachi tocaba en la plaza. Era frontera y ahí estaba la plaza. Era mi gusto ir cada semana... ahí en la placita. Yo no tenía tiempo para la escuela. Fui a la escuela primaria, pero no la terminé. Y luego me casé y ya no hubo nada de eso. Mi Papá si fue. Me hubiera gustado haber estudiado de perdido el inglés. Me pesa. (When I came to the United States I was at an age to go to school but I never did it because I was running around to hear the mariachis. In my little town it was the custom that the mariachis played in the town square. It was a border town and right there [on the other side] was the town square. It was my pleasure to go every week... there to the town square. I didn't have time for school. And then I got married and there was none of that. My Father did go [to school]. I would like to at least have studied English. I feel bad about it.)

Fructuoso "Tocho" Valdez was a man considerably older than Adela. He was a mariachi and a singer. The two of them formed a duo which toured the southwest and performed at varied venues, including sports arenas, theaters, rodeos and *palenques* in addition to church and social functions. When they moved to Los Angeles, Fructuoso formed Mariachi Los Vaqueros (The Cowboys.), one of the first mariachi groups in Los Angeles.³⁶ Her husband's mariachi was a good one. As she had her children, she continued to perform as a soloist with and without her husband's mariachi. Her husband did not support her in her work. Children came and it became harder, but she never ignored her duties as a housewife. Fructuoso would have liked Adela to have had a child each year, to make sure she would have to stay home, but five were enough. Sometimes he would get jealous or even upset about her being in the business, but she never neglected her children. "*Es duro cuando uno está casada*". (It's hard when you are married).

³⁶ Adela mentions here that the only other Mariachi in Los Angeles at the time was *Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano*.

Las Generalas is Formed

When María Elena started to recruit for her mariachi, the first person she called was Adela. They already knew each other since Juan Matías, María Elena's son, was playing in Los Vaqueros, Adela's husband's mariachi. They each relate the same story of this recruitment to the group. When María Elena called Adela, she asked, "Do you know how to play the guitar?" Adela responded, "Well, I know a few chords". And María Elena closed the deal with, "That will do."³⁷)

Fructuoso thought that the ladies were crazy to want to make their own group. "¡Están locas!" "Viene aquí y las mujeres cambian." (They come here [to the United States] and the women change.) He thought that Adela would leave him if she were successful. Many of the husbands thought similarly that the mariachi would make the women want more freedom.

Pensaban que con eso [el mariachi femenino] las mujeres se iban a liberar más y todo eso, pero este, en realidad, no. María Elena no... No quería demostrar eso, no quería hacer eso. Lo que ella quería era que... los hombres vieron que la mujer podría superar en este ambiente. Y sin... andar en cantinas ni nada de eso... 'Nosotros vamos a poner ejemplo de que podemos ganar dinero y trabajar en eso, y no andar en las cantinas'. (Valdez)

("They thought that with this [the female mariachi] the women would become more liberated and all that but in reality, no. María Elena no... she didn't want to show that, she didn't want to do that. What she wanted was to show that women could make it in that environment. And without... working in bars or any such thing ... 'We are going to show the world that we can make money and work in this (field) and not have to work in the bars.'")

The idea was to show that women could be successful at playing mariachi music and to show that mariachi music was a legitimate music. About women's liberation, María Elena states, "*Una cosa es libertad y otra cosa libertinaje.*" (Freedom is one thing and licentiousness another)

The rest of the women were recruited from the local church choirs. María Elena went from church to church listening to the voices of the women who sang in the choir. When she heard a voice that she thought would complement the group she was trying to form, she would wait outside after the service and approach them with her project. If the woman were interested and she was married, María Elena would speak to the husband, requesting his permission for his wife to participate.

³⁷ Both women retell the story almost word for word, as if this conversation made up an important piece in their shared history.

Of each woman she asked what instrument they would like to play, each responded, “Whatever you think”. None of the women had prior musical experience, except in the church choir. None played an instrument or had musicians in their families.(38³⁸) María Elena purchased second hand instruments for the group using her own funds. The women didn’t have extra funds to invest. They were all housewives. None of them worked outside the home. All had children. Two were single, the rest were married. They were all Mexican nationals.

María Elena told her son, Juan Matías Muñoz, that he would be teaching the women. He was a good son and had some degree of proficiency on all of the instruments so he was willing and able. They started rehearsing twice a week, first in María Elena’s home and later in a hall that one of the churches lent to her. He would play the part for them and have them try to do as he did. Juan Matías would spend a lot of time on the trumpets and violins and then tell his mother to just follow Adela. “*Siguele a Adelita.*” His mother’s response: “*Y Adelita a quien sigue?*” “And who should Adela follow?”(39³⁹) When they were first starting up, the women would often become impatient, wanting to know when they would be able to perform. But María Elena would not allow this to happen until they could at least make a respectable sound.

The male mariachis would show up to the rehearsals to see what they were doing. Some of the male mariachis thought the idea of these women playing was somewhat absurd. None of them were young. One mariachi who attended a rehearsal told them, “*¡Mira, no más! ¡Entre todas hacen cien años!*” (“Look at you. Between you there’s over a hundred years!”) To which María Elena responded, “*Si, m’hijo, y si traes a tu mamá se van a hacer docientos.*” (“Yes. Bring your mother so we’ll have two hundred.”) The fellow quietly left. Juan Matías had warned him not to mess with his mother! “*Así se hizo el grupito. Nunca fuimos muy buenas pero trabajamos mucho.*” (And that is how the little group was formed. We never were very good, but we worked a lot.) (Muñoz)

Going to Work

Las Generalas was the first all-female mariachi in Los Angeles, and probably the first all-female mariachi in the United States (Pérez and Sobrino). Once they started performing the work kept coming in. They had lots of work. They were booked Thursdays through Sundays. The first music that the women had learned was the mariachi mass, and this they played for free every Sunday before going on to their paying jobs. Some of the established mariachi players declared that they were ruining the music. Pedro Rey(40⁴⁰) of *Los Galleros de Pedro Rey* said that they were disgracing mariachi music (Muñoz). Others complained that they were taking all the jobs. Some thought that

³⁸ This directly conflicts with the information reported by Pérez and Sobrino in their internet History.

³⁹ Another story that both women relate, almost exactly the same.

⁴⁰ Pedro Rey, the leader of *the Mariachi Los Galleros de Pedro Rey*, one of the two show groups in the United States of international importance at the time.

they looked ridiculous. Some thought they had no right to be there. But, María Elena was determined to prove her point.

The women went to their jobs together in the van that María Elena had purchased for that purpose. She would pick up the women at their homes and bring them back when the evening was done. The van had their name printed on the side. The women wore matching mariachi uniforms elegantly embellished and they had matching suits in many different colors, blue, black, brown, red, maroon and of course pink. (Valdez). Adela drove and María Elena told her where to go.

Because of her more extensive experience in the world of mariachi, Adela had developed guidelines for maintaining a respectful image both of the profession⁴¹ and of her person. Both she and María Elena were aware of what people might say. The women were not allowed to drink during the jobs and were told not to dance in the mariachi suit during the breaks. This, in the mariachi world, was uniformly seen at that time as being disrespectful “to the suit” and all that it represents. On one occasion, one of the women took issue with this.

Había una que algún día que llegábamos a un salón a trabajar y se fue a la barra, y dije, ‘María Elena, eso no está bien, que vinimos a trabajar, no vinimos a tomar. Y además somos mujeres; tenemos que darnos nuestro lugar’. Iban y nos ofrecían ‘¿qué quieren tomar, cerveza o vino?’ ...un vaso de agua o una soda. Otra cosa que yo decía: durante el descanso unas se pusieron a bailar. Le dije, ‘María Elena, eso no está bien.’ ‘Pues, la dices’ ‘No, no. Usted es la que dirige aquí. Yo te ayudo pero yo no quiero poner en mal con ella.’ Salieron de la cocina para ir a trabajar. Y María Elena dice ‘Marta, dice la Lela que no está bien que tu te sales a bailar’. Y así me descubrieron. ‘Pues que no salen a bailar con el traje puesto. Que ese traje se respeta.’ Y contesta, ‘Sabes que, a mí me costó mi dinero. Es mi traje y yo puedo hacer lo que yo quiera con él.’ ‘Está bien, ¿Sabes porque no te contesto? Porque ud. de este ambiente, ud. no sabe nada. Pero para mí, no.

(There was this one gal who one day when we got to a job she went to the bar and I said, ‘Maria Elena, that’s not right. We came to work, not to drink. In addition we are women and we have to act in a respectable fashion. They [the clients] would come and offer us, ‘What would you like to drink? Beer or Wine?’...A glass of water or a soda. Another thing I would say, during the breaks some of the gals would go dance. I said, ‘Maria Elena, that’s not right.’ ‘You tell them.’ ‘No, no. You are the one in charge here. I help you out but I don’t want to get on her wrong side.’ The girls came out of the kitchen to start working and Maria Elena says,

⁴¹ The mariachis call this respecting the suit or *respetar el traje*. This means acting in a respectful way while you are wearing your suit and representing something larger than yourself.

‘Marta, Adela says it’s not okay for you to go out dancing.’ That’s how they knew it was me. ‘Well, you shouldn’t go out dancing with the suit on. This suit deserves respect!’ And she answers, ‘Know what? I paid for this suit with my own money. It’s my suit and I can do with it what I want.’ ‘That’s okay. Do you know why I am not going to get upset with that response? Because you know nothing about this world. That’s okay for you. But for me, no.’ (Valdez)

Adela understood why the other woman would feel that way, not understanding the subtle nuances of the profession because she had had no previous experience. But Adela herself would continue to show respect for her suit, and consequently her culture.

Another way in which the women’s image was maintained was in the type and time of the jobs that were accepted by the group. The group did not play in bars or at affairs that they thought might get out of hand. Also María Elena would not take jobs that ended past nine o’clock in the evening. In this way she hoped to avoid problems for the women with their husbands. “*Nos hablaban para una planta de las 7 hasta la madrugada. Nunca agarraba los trabajos así. No quería tener o la preocupación... [pensé] ‘yo soy sola y yo no quiero ver que alguien se quede sola para mi’.*” (They called us for a steady gig from 7 until dawn. I never took the jobs like that. I didn’t want the worry... [I thought] “I am alone and I don’t want anyone else to end up alone because of me”) (Muñoz). No woman should have to jeopardize her marriage to perform in the mariachi.

Most of the husbands felt that their wives were under responsible authority when María Elena was in charge and trusted her good judgment. Even so, some of the women had problems with their husbands. “*El esposo de la que tocaba la trompeta se quebró la trompeta pa’ que no quería que la siguiera. Ya no siguió.*” (The husband of the woman who played the trumpet broke the trumpet because he didn’t want her to continue. And she didn’t continue) (Valdez).

Many of the women who attended their presentations were thrilled and interested in becoming involved. It gave them great pleasure to see the women perform. Of course there were always instances of men misunderstanding the women’s intentions. Adela would hand out business cards with her number on it and men would call to invite her out. But, as Adela states, “*según como te portas te tratarán*”. (“People will treat you according to the way you act”) Sometimes her husband would get jealous, imagining all the men that she would be flirting with during their performances. “*Mi esposo me decía, antes de que iba con nosotras, ‘Ya me imagino como te miren, como te inviten...’ Pos, te imagines mal’.*” (My husband would say to me, before he started playing with us, ‘I can imagine how they look at you, how they ask you out ...’ ‘Well, you imagine wrong.’) Finally María Elena invited Adela’s husband to come along on the jobs so he could see for himself. Fructuoso started playing with the group. This created new problems for Adela. Because her husband was a mariachi and she had worked in the field, Adela was

the one who handled the contracts for *Las Generales*. She knew what to include and how to request a deposit and verify the information. With her husband in the group, it was “*un pleitazo*”, a big fight. He wanted to be the one to do the contracts and acted as if she were not doing it correctly. She stood her ground and told him, “*No. Yo se arreglarlas*” “No, I know how to arrange this.” Adela continued being the member in charge of the contracts.

As the group’s reputation grew, the women were occasionally assisted by male mariachis. Many of the guys wanted to play with the group, because they had so much work. Some of the women became seduced by the money that they were earning. They felt as if they no longer had to practice to get better because they were already able to earn money with their abilities. In particular, one woman, who had not learned the mass proficiently, wanted to get paid to play it on Sundays. Adela told María Elena absolutely not!! If they were to pay someone it should be someone who could actually play it. They eventually replaced this woman with a male mariachi.

As women moved away or moved on *Las Generales* transformed into a coed group and then, sometime around 1983 (“A Look at the History of Women in Mariachi Music”), eventually disbanded. The women who had started this group to prove that they could live off this music without having to play in the cantinas, that they could be respectful of themselves while performing this music and that the music itself was a legitimate expression of their Mexican culture had proved their point. They had been successful as women in this arena previously reserved for men.

Conclusion

The decision on the part of María Elena to form an all-female mariachi was a radical act in that it challenged the status quo. Women playing mariachi music was far from the norm and, although there were a few “token” women in male mariachis when *Las Generales* was formed, both María Elena and Adela claim, believably so, to have not seen them. The existing working female mariachi musicians in California were also all violinists, so to have women on the other instruments was new by any standard and to have the entire group be women was previously unheard of in this country^(42⁴²). Neither of these women list the Chicano movement or the Women’s Liberation movement as a contributing factor to the circumstances leading to this group. And as a direct influence, neither appears to have been present.

However, during this era, as a direct result of the feminist movement, general changes in the American consciousness had already become somewhat commonplace, allowing for this type of participation. María Elena is a remarkable woman who immigrated to the United States, learned English, held government jobs and pursued higher education. She worked in upper management as a director of a government

⁴² In Mexico there were three women guitarists who worked in the male mariachi scene along the border with California, in Mexicali. La Zenaida, Manuela in Mexicali.

facility. The fact that she, as a Mexican woman, had access to higher education and was considered for and given a job in upper management can be seen as not just a reflection of her amazing capabilities but also as a consequence of the era in which this occurred.

By the time *Las Generalas* formed, the Women's liberation movement had made some serious headway into the American psyche, and the Chicano liberation movement had impacted the psyche of Los Angeles. In the process of formulating the idea and forming the group, María Elena availed herself of the emerging societal paradigm. In addition, María Elena was able to manipulate the cultural resistance to this societal upheaval of women's perceived normative roles and move into the labor and education arena after the death of her husband largely because she no longer had a husband. Although she did not directly make this connection in the interview, many elements of her behavior suggest that she was aware that her position as a widow allowed her more freedom than she had experienced as a married woman. She was above criticism in her career because she entered the job market out of necessity after her husband's death. The husbands "released" their wives to her responsibility as an independent woman of character.

Because she was working, she had funds at her discretion to initiate the mariachi: purchase instruments, make business cards, have the mariachi name and contact information painted on her van. She succeeded because of who she was *and* the opportunities that were available for women at that time.

The all-female band represents well the assimilation to American life while the choice of a Mariachi clearly demonstrates the depth of the cultural ties to Mexico. While challenging the system of male hegemony in the mariachi world, the women were also very careful to acknowledge and maintain the traditional role of women as evidenced in the recruitment of the members from churches, the guidelines for behavior at jobs, the curfew limit on work hours and the use of requesting permission from the husbands to be allowed to work.

The stated goal of *Las Generalas*' founder was twofold. The first was to demonstrate that the mariachi ensemble, music and musician were dignified and worthy of respect. Reacting to clearly negative opinions of her beloved culture, María Elena set out to vindicate the reputation of the mariachi musician and the genre. This goal is clearly indicative of national pride in Mexico and the Mexican heritage. The second goal, that of proving that women were also capable of performing and earning a living from mariachi music, is reflective of the feminist influence on the American culture. The fact that a traditional image of the feminine, pure, sexless woman was maintained does not make this less of an act of American-feminist influenced culture, rather it makes the act of these Mexican national women living in the United States a truly transnational representation of women's complex loyalties.

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