



¡VIVA, COOGS!

MAD FOR MARIACHI PUMAS

BY SARA TUBBS



It was seeing a mariachi band from a rival Texas university play *its* fight song at the 2018 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo's Mariachi Invitational

that really put things into focus. Former University of Houston System Regent Paula Mendoza and Susie Molina, director of community relations in the Office of Governmental Relations at UH, realized it was definitely time for action.

"For such a long time, everywhere I went, people would ask me why UH didn't have a mariachi band.

I really didn't have an answer for them," Molina recalled. "Then when we saw the other school's mariachi band play, that was it. I thought, 'OK, we have to do something now. We *have* to figure out a way to make this happen.'"

Fast-forward two years later, something big definitely did happen. UH started its very own mariachi band, aptly named Mariachi Pumas (*puma* is Spanish for cougar).

People have been singing its praises and applauding "Houston's University" for taking this step forward in acknowledging its Hispanic heritage.

"We *have* to figure out a way to make this happen."

MEET THE PUMAS

Each of the three UH students you're about to meet is following a different professional path — aspiring educator, speech pathologist and construction manager. But they're united by culture and a love of mariachi music that is distinctly their own.

Deep breath. Nearly-closed lips. Exhale. Through the blare of his shining brass trumpet, Osiel Fernandez is keeping his late grandfather's musical legacy alive. Although Fernandez never had the chance to meet the man, who passed away before he was born, the UH student is following in his footsteps as a passionate mariachi musician.

"I've always wanted to make him proud," said Fernandez, a graduate student in the College of Education, who studied mariachi at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston. "Just hearing my parents tell his story and seeing photos of him in his *charro* suit, holding his trumpet, made me want to look and play like him."

As a classically trained violinist since she was 10, Abby Elorza, a student in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, never felt the need to sing in front of an audience, but when she transitioned to mariachi music, she found the power of her voice.

"I discovered something new about myself. I am not as shy anymore," said Elorza, who plans to be a speech pathologist. "I'm learning to just relax, enjoy the time and the experience."

Construction management major Jose Pineda is the first person in his family of Norteño musicians to play mariachi music. He's been playing violin on the local professional circuit since high school.

Fernandez, Elorza and Pineda are among the 15 members of the Mariachi Pumas. The student ensemble formed in fall 2019 within the Moores School of Music at the Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts, joining the award-winning Concert Chorale, Jazz Ensemble and Symphony Orchestra.

'WELCOME WITH OPEN ARMS... OR PAWS'

The formation of the group is notable because Hispanics make up enough of the student body for UH to receive the Hispanic-Serving Institution designation from the U.S. Dept. of Education. A university qualifies for this when the enrollment of full-time undergraduates is at least 25% Hispanic (UH is currently at 32%). The HSI classification means UH has access to additional funding or grants that support or expand educational opportunities of Hispanic students.

"That is a designation of which we are all proud, but it only tells a part of the story of the deep cultural roots and ambitions our University cherishes," said Paula Myrick Short, UH senior vice president for academic affairs and provost.

"To have a student group share their heritage through musical performances helps to bring culture to life."

Once word spread that UH administrators, including Provost Short, had given the green light to start a mariachi program, financial commitments started pouring in from alumni as well as those not affiliated with the University. They just fell in love with the idea of having a collegiate mariachi band.

Consisting of an advanced competitive group and a noncompetitive group for beginners, the Pumas welcome all interested UH students with open arms ... or paws. They rehearse twice a week to hone their

mariachi skills. You don't necessarily need to be a musician already, but you do need to be willing to learn, according to program director Jose Longoria.

"I am here to help you discover yourself or do great things as a mariachi," he said, summarizing the message he brings to the neophyte Mariachi Pumas. "I want to give these students the full experience and show them what it feels to be a real mariachi performer."

MARIACHI'S RICH HISTORY

Here in Houston, and throughout Texas, people often encounter strolling mariachi groups at restaurants and special community events without realizing the music's rich history. Mariachi is a genre of regional music that, according to some musical historians, originated in the Mexican state of Jalisco in the 19th century in the town of Cocula. Standards such as "Volver, Volver," "Las Mañanitas" and "El Son de la Negra" celebrate the joys, struggles and triumphs of the Mexican people. Songs are about love and heartache, others about politics and the simple pleasures of country life. They range from slow and mournful to festive and exhilarating.

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Osiel Fernandez

Similar to a Spanish theatrical orchestra, a traditional mariachi group consists of as many as eight violins, at least one guitar, a *vihuela* — a high-pitched five-string guitar, a *guitarrón* — small acoustic bass with six strings, two trumpets and sometimes a harp. Members wear elegantly embroidered *charro* suits with wide-brimmed sombreros. Each member of the troupe sings, sometimes taking the lead, sometimes the chorus. The Pumas recently added another weapon to its repertoire — a shiny, red and white UH-embellished accordion, gifted by the Gabbanelli family, renowned for their custom-designed accordions. Mariachi bands don't typically use accordions, but Longoria says they can offer a special musical touch to a specific song.



(Top Left) Osiel Fernandez. (Top Middle) Abby Elorza. (Top Right) Jose Pineda. (Bottom) From the shine of their boots to the gleaming embroidery of their *charro* suits, the UH Puma Mariachi Band represents the University with pride.



AN OVERNIGHT SENSATION



ongoria is a third generation, professional mariachi musician and math educator who developed the mariachi programs at Sam Houston

Math, Science and Technology Center and Patrick Henry Middle School in the Houston Independent School District. He also runs Mariachi Imperial De America, an award-winning international touring group based in Houston that was founded by his father in the 1980s.

“It wasn’t an art form for us, it was a way of living. We had to make money,” recalled Longoria, who at seven years old started playing the violin, then went on to learn the *viuela* and *guitarrón*.

By his teenage years, Longoria was a full-fledged member of his father’s group and eventually took over as its leader. Mariachi Imperial De America went from playing at restaurants, weddings and parties to winning competitions and being a global phenomenon in China, India, Armenia, Macedonia and Canada — adapting popular mariachi songs in each country’s language.

What Longoria has done for Mariachi Imperial, he is hoping to do for the Pumas who have arguably become an overnight sensation. Donned in dazzling Cougar Red uniforms with embroidered jackets, pants and bowties, the performers have already showcased their songs and signature style at an impressive array of venues, including Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner’s second inauguration, this year’s Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s Mariachi Invitational, the grand opening of H-E-B’s newest location in Third Ward, as well as participating in statewide competitions. The requests for appearances keep coming in, each one presenting another opportunity for the group to serve as goodwill ambassadors for the University and demonstrate the pride the school feels for its Hispanic heritage.

“Houston finally sees what we have at UH,” said Fernandez. “To have the chance to play at the Mayor’s inauguration was, in my opinion, the biggest thing we’ve done so far. All of Houston saw who we are and what we can do.”

Longoria notes revenue from outside engagements goes toward equipment, travel to conferences and workshops and other activities that benefit the growth of the program that mainly relies on monetary

donations and pledges. The students are not paid, nor do they get any sort of academic credit. For them, performing with Mariachi Pumas is clearly a labor of love.

“To me, this means marrying your pride for the University and the pride of your culture,” said Molina, a 2004 UH graduate. “It’s a winning combination for the University. It also teaches my daughters that you can carry your heritage into an institution of higher education.”

INSTANT FAMILY CONNECTION



he student musicians agree that they are pleased to bring

their heritage and diverse backgrounds to UH and the Mariachi Pumas. However, being a member runs deeper than just playing an instrument, singing a song and wearing a *charro* suit. It’s about having an instant family connection.

Many of the performers have been learning mariachi music under Longoria since they were Houston ISD students. Pineda and his younger sister Yoana, who is also a member of Mariachi Pumas, have been with Longoria since middle school and consider him to be like a second dad.

“We have that chemistry as teacher and student, and I already know what he expects,” said Pineda, who also plays professionally with Longoria’s group Mariachi Imperial.

Although Elorza didn’t know Longoria before she joined the Pumas, she immediately felt the group’s “family vibe.”

“I think it’s important because it brings a different opportunity for those who want to be connected with the culture. Everyone is bringing a little bit of what they know,” Elorza said. “Having that constant support is a great feeling — especially at UH.”

Fernandez always knew of Longoria in Houston’s mariachi world and finally had the chance to meet him when Longoria auditioned



Opposite, upper left: The two Jose’s: (l-r) Pineda and Longoria play mariachi at UH and with Longoria’s professional group Mariachi Imperial de America.

Opposite, bottom left: A traditional mariachi group consists of as many as eight violins.

As a Mariachi Puma, Osiel Fernandez (above) is carrying on his late grandfather’s legacy by playing the trumpet.

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for band director. Now, Fernandez gets to work side-by-side with his mentor and share ideas about how to make the Pumas even better, whether from rehearsal, recruiting or deciding what songs to play.

“Ever since I got to UH in 2016, I knew this school was ready to have a mariachi program. You walk around campus and hear people playing Mexican music. We are so diverse and UH is the perfect place for this,” said Fernandez, who hopes to run a mariachi program of his own after he graduates with a master’s degree. All the while he’ll continue to honor his late grandfather.

Since the Mariachi Pumas have accomplished so much in so little time, it’s natural to wonder, what’s next? If Longoria has his way, UH will become a pipeline to develop mariachi teachers who go back to the high schools. Plans are already underway to offer mariachi workshops at UH for band directors as part of the Moores School of Music’s summer workshop series for music educators.

“I want people to say ‘I want to go to UH because of the Mariachi Pumas,’” Longoria said. “I love the music and I love working with people who want to learn. If I can show you what my passion is, then I’ve done my job.”

Perhaps a good way to sum up that enthusiasm is in the words of a song — “El Viajero,” a classic mariachi tune, of course:

*México, México
Te llevo en el corazón
Con la alegría del mariachi
Me brota la inspiración*

Or loosely translated:

*“With the joy of the Mariachi inspiration springing up ...
Mexico, Mexico I take you in my heart.”*

To that, you might add a hearty *grito* and a spirited ¡Viva, Coogs! 🇲🇽