

LOS MARIACHIS

By MADGE MACBETH

THE starlit night was filled with their moaning melodies. Although they drifted through the streets, their music always seemed near enough to rest upon the ear. They sang of love, of death, of the serpent (*culebra*) and even of *The White Christmas* which none of them had ever seen. More familiar were they with ardent sunshine.

There were seven of them, dressed in white pants, white open-necked shirts and their bare brown feet were covered by huaraches. Enormous wide-brimmed felt hats put every other variety of halo headwear to shame.

Their skin was dark; their teeth were white; their smiles were slow but charming.

"Reserved with strangers," a friend explained. "*Flojo* (lazy), avoiding real work, but on the whole, they're good fellows."

Well, perhaps musicians do appear lazy and unwilling to work in the eyes of some people!

And ideas of courtesy differ. While talking to me, the guitarist burped respectfully in my face. Several times. I accepted the circumstance with fortitude, impressed by the fact that the fellow had lunched heartily on *Salchichas* (a garlic seasoned sausage), robust cheese that wasn't born yesterday, a spiced dish or two and plenty of Bohemia beer.

All of which refers to a group of Mariachis in Mexico's village of Chapala.

Mariachis are wandering minstrels, not to be confused with troubadours. Three or four may form a group, or as many as twelve. Five is an average number. Originally, a band included only stringed instruments; violins, guitars, a monster guitar called *guitaron*, and a *vibuela* (variously pronounced and written *biguela*, *viguela*), a tiny mandolin-and-guitar combination. Later, trumpets were added, and *requintos*—sharp-voiced clarinets, made of wood; and now a xylophone may occasionally be heard, especially in groups that have a permanent location. For example, in a broadcasting station.

Information about the Mariachis is difficult to uncover. Save for a few lines included in books on Mexican folklore, there is almost nothing printed, and data given verbally is so contradictory that it would be amusing were it not so exasperating. The men most closely concerned are the most inaccurate and unreliable.

One of the Chapala group told me that Mariachi was an Aztec word, that the music bore the stamp of Aztec times. He was wide of the mark because the Aztecs used none of the instruments composing a Mariachi band and none of the songs or melodies show the slightest resemblance to the drum-accented music of the earlier people.

Another fellow thought that the Conquistadores had introduced Mariachis into the country. A poor guess, for it would be hard to find rhythms less like the folk music of Spain.

A third man declared that pre-dating the Spaniards, peasants had their bands, including harpists, but that not until the 1920's did they combine the instruments now used, including the *viuela*! Only then, did the singers as we know them, begin to make a pattern in national life. As for the name, it was suggested by a percussion instrument called a Mariachi drum.

I could find no confirmation of this in any other source.

The most logical theory dates the Mariachis as we know them, from the time of the ill-fated Maximilian. Music for the French Court was a 'must' and native music certainly would have provided an interesting diversion for many members of the large colony. At Court, however, it is said, nothing Mexican was acceptable, and musicians of the country were angered at being ignored while performers from Europe were imported. Following the example set at Chapultepec, the royal residence of Maximilian and Carlota, it became the fashion to hire French musicians to play at entertainments, especially weddings. Specialists in this type of work were distinguished from other musicians by the name Mariachi which was the closest approach the Mexicans could make to the French word 'mariage'. Mariaché or Mariachi thus became a musician who played at weddings, and the Mexican fraternity looked with resentment and envy at the interlopers who garnered such rich harvests from their work. They must have asked themselves: "What have they got that we haven't?" and the enterprising among them learned the foreign tunes so exclusively demanded. Then they horned in very profitably on the usurpers' territory.

In the state of Jalisco, and in and about the city of Guadalajara, they seem to have come to their full flowering, although Colima and Nayarit contest this claim, and not without justification. Their music both lost and gained as it yielded to the influence of France. As their name is a corruption, so their style is a corruption, embracing any compositions they think will be popular. There is no such thing as *typical* Mariachi

music, if that term connotes an identifiable pace and rhythm comparable with the tango, calypso, sardana and so on. Any tune can be performed by Mariachis . . . from the *Volga Boatman* to the *Indian Love Lyrics*. What makes these compositions *Mariachi* is the odd grouping of instruments, the harmonization of the voices and the strange inflection given to the phrases.

Of some importance, also, is the fact that few of the men can read music. The vast majority of them play and sing entirely by ear. Occasionally, the effect is that of several competing ears! However, a few groups, notably in Mexico City, are studying music and are appearing on concert platforms as well as on the radio. It is unavoidable that much of the charm inherent in primitive music is strained out by standardizing and formalization.

Contrary though it may appear, Mariachi songs contrive to be brisk and mournful at the same time. They are lengthy and often monotonous, the key changing every few verses, but the basic melody remaining the same. It is said that if a singer finds the range too great, the leader calmly announces that he will transpose the key and perform the piece "in its original setting". In this way, much of the old music has been preserved—if distorted.

The words? In bygone days many a peasant believed that Mass was said in a language incomprehensible to the Devil—for security reasons, doubtless. A listener might hold some such thoughts while trying to untangle Mariachi songs from a jumble of sounds and translate them into intelligible Spanish. Trap a Guadalajara band on the market place, or proceed to the Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City, requesting the rollicking heel-tapping *La Ranchera*, the dreamy *El Vals* or the rhythmic *Carretero*, and my meaning will be clear.

The same song may sound very different when different bands perform it. Here is one version of the popular *La Culebra*

I went to the mill.
Suddenly, I saw close by
A serpent looking at me.

I cried out, Hi there, snake!
And everyone cried . . . Jose, come quick!
But watch out for the snake
Because if he bites my feet
You'll have to kill him.
If he bites my feet,
I can't walk, any more.

The popular conception of the artistic temperament is not always discernible in these roving musicians, who once upon a time, disdained money and sang and played for the sheer love of it. Now, the peso is highly regarded. Without its magical persuasive quality, you get no music. Not even co-operation . . . Catching a picturesque group together, I approached a member of it, and asked permission to take a photograph. His answer was prompt and pointed.

"Five pesos," he said.

Secretly amused, I pretended astonishment. Five pesos was more than the band would earn for an hour's work in the cantina.

"Five pesos is a good deal of money," I protested. "You are all here, costumed and complete with instruments. I shall put you to no trouble."

"Five pesos, senora," he repeated firmly. "You must pay for *la postura*—the pose—!"