

viva el MARIACHI!



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



NATI CANO'S MARIACHI LOS CAMPEROS



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A traditionalist and a visionary, Nati Cano has both mirrored and shaped the history of mariachi music. He and Los Camperos, the group he founded and directs, have been a fixture in the Los Angeles area and a driving force in the mariachi tradition in North America for more than 40 years. His longtime association with Linda Ronstadt, backing her up in live performances and on her milestone *Canciones de Mi Padre* album, helped catapult mariachi music to unprecedented national prominence. In this collection of newly issued material, Cano and Los Camperos perform some of mariachi's most beloved songs with the vibrance and intensity that distinguish them as one of the finest mariachi bands in the world. *Extensive notes, photos, 52 minutes.*

Compiled, produced, and annotated by Daniel Sheehy
SPW CD 40459

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1. Los Arrieros (The Muleteers) 4:42
2. San Miguel El Alto 2:35
3. Se Me Hizo Fácil (It Was Easy for Me) 2:51
4. El Gustito (The Little Pleasure) 2:27
5. Gema (The Gem) 2:29
6. El Autlense (The Man from Autlán) 3:40
7. Paloma Negra (Black Dove) 2:37

8. Ojitos Verdes (Green Eyes) 3:40
9. Árboles de la Barranca (The Trees of the Ravine) 2:42
10. La Malagueña (The Woman from Málaga) 3:13
11. Virgencita de Talpa (The Virgin of Talpa) 2:17
12. Que Te Vas, Te Vas (You Say You Are Going Away) 2:33
13. Amor Ciego (Blind Love) 3:39
14. El Jilguerillo (The Goldfinch) 2:04
15. Tequila con Limón (Tequila with Lime) 4:20
16. Entre Suspiro y Suspiro (Between Sigh and Sigh) 3:09
17. El Cihualteco (The Man from Cihuatlán) 2:45



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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¡Viva

EL MARIACHI!

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Curator's Introduction

A traditionalist and a visionary, Nati Cano has both mirrored and shaped the history of mariachi music. He was born in 1933 into a family of mariachi musicians of Ahuisculco, Jalisco, a small, rural town much like the many other west Mexican communities that gave life to mariachi tradition. His career took him first to nearby Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, and then farther away to the border town of Mexicali, and then to his final destination of Los Angeles, one of the most populous and influential cities of "greater Mexico." In Los Angeles, he and Los Camperos, the group he founded and directed for more than 40 years, emerged as a driving force of the mariachi music tradition in the United States, and to a certain extent, in Mexico.

I first heard Los Camperos in 1969 at La Fonda, the restaurant they had opened that same year at 2501 Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. I was a student at UCLA, where I had joined the student mariachi ensemble, a "world music" performance class in the Institute of Ethnomusicology. For my fellow student mariachi enthusiasts and me, a trip to La Fonda was akin to visiting a sacred temple of mariachi music, and Nati Cano was its high priest. The repertoire Los Camperos played during the early years of La Fonda was a mix of older rhythms of the *son jalisciense*, songs from the 1950s and earlier, and contemporary pieces marked by the more complex harmonies of American and Mexican commercial popular music. For us young ethnomusicologists, the enduring, hard-driving *sones* and the emotion-packed *canciones rancheras* (country songs) held the greatest attraction. The pieces in the popular music vein seemed like an encroachment of commercial interests on the repertoire that made

mariachi music special. Little did we know, as you will read below, that the blending of old and new mariachi sounds was part of Nati Cano's musical and social agenda. His life's goal has been to bring greater acceptance, understanding, and respect to the mariachi tradition, and to reach the widest possible audience with his music. His uncompromising position has been to preserve the essential "mariachi sound," in his words, as the baseline of the tradition. I know that many would agree that in this, he has succeeded.

Now, more than 30 years later, it brings me great personal pleasure to offer this collection of recordings made by Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano at various recording sessions during the 1990s. Eleven of the seventeen tracks were heard on the self-produced album *Sounds of Mariachi: Los Camperos de Nati Cano*. Three others are outtakes from the 1996 recording session for that album, and the remaining three are from recordings for a radio show featuring Los Camperos as part of the series "Club del Sol," produced by Karen Jefferson. The recording includes *sones*, *canciones rancheras*, *huapangos*, and *boleros*—cornerstones of mariachi music today. Extensive notes describe the origins of the mariachi, the musical genres featured, and the significance of Cano and Los Camperos. The title ¡Viva el Mariachi! (Long Live the Mariachi!) reflects Nati Cano's passion for the music that he so deeply feels an obligation to pass on to future generations.

Daniel Sheehy, Ph.D.
Director and Curator, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



Mariachi Origins

In 1852, Cosme Santa Anna, a priest in Rosamorada parish of the west Mexican community of Santiago Ixcuintla, wrote to the archbishop in Guadalajara to complain of “mariachis”—entertainment with music, drinking, gambling, and loud talk—that occurred on Holy Saturday in the town plaza in front of the church (Jáuregui 1990:16). This is the first known written record of the word *mariachi* connected to music and merrymaking. In 1859, the cleric Ignacio Aguilar wrote that in Tlalchapa, Guerrero, he heard a music called “Mariache, comprised of large harps, violins, and bass drum played without resting” (1990:18). These references are important to historians, because they disprove a popular myth that emerged decades later, claiming that the word *mariachi* derived from the French *mariage*. The French had occupied Mexico in the 1860s, and, as the story goes, the musicians performing for the French imperialists at weddings (*mariages*) were given the name *mariachi*. The term *mariachi* in all likelihood has its roots in one of the Indian languages of the region, possibly in the now extinct language of the Coca people. In his 1908 book *Paisajes de Occidente*, Enrique Barrios de los Ríos described festivities in the coastal region around Santiago Ixcuintla in the 1890s. He wrote of dance platforms (*tarimas*) called mariachis, about one yard wide, two yards long, and one and a half feet off the ground, placed between stands of the outdoor market in the town plaza: “all night long, and even during the day, people danced lively *jarabes* to the sound of the harp, or of violin and *vihuela* [type of guitar], or of violin, snare drum, cymbals, and bass drum, in a deafening quartet” (43–44).

The 20th century was a time of enormous population growth and urbanization in Mexico. From 1900 to 2000, the country’s population increased eightfold, to around 100 million people, and the population of greater Mexico City increased by a factor of forty, to more than 20 million people, more than a fifth of Mexico’s inhabitants (Iturriaga 1989:xii). People from rural areas, musicians included, flocked to the cities in search of opportunity and the conveniences of urban life. In 1905, the four-member mariachi led by Justo Villa of the town of Cocula, outside of Guadalajara, traveled to Mexico City to perform for the birthday of President Porfirio Díaz; their performance is considered the first by a mariachi in the national capital (Rafael 1998:6). Eventually, many other mariachis followed. Growth of the media and the commercialization of music also marked the 20th century. In the period 1908–1909, “all three major American phonograph companies—Columbia, Edison, and Victor—recorded the Cuarteto Coculense in Mexico City” (Clark 1998:2). Cuarteto Coculense was the name given to Villa’s group. Thanks to Chris Strachwitz and his Arhoolie record label, many of these and other early mariachi recordings are available today. (For details, see For Further Listening, below.)

Radio and cinema brought mariachi music into the lives of Mexicans in all corners of the nation. The powerful station XEW broadcasted mariachi music throughout the republic and beyond, beginning in the 1930s. Movies with *ranchero* (country) themes, like *Allá en el rancho grande* ‘There on the Big Ranch’ (1936), *Jalisco nunca pierde* ‘Jalisco Never Loses’

(1937), and *Ay, Jalisco, no te rajes* 'Oh, Jalisco, Don't Give In' (1941), featured mariachis, and *charro cantor* (singing cowboy) film superstars like Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante were accompanied by mariachis. Professional songwriters wrote new compositions in a *música típica*, pseudofolk music vein, contributing in this way to shaping the media-driven images of rural people and themes. The era following the revolution (1910–1917), particularly the nationalistic regime of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), saw the crafting of images evoking national identity, with mariachi music being one of the most prominent. The radio, recording, and cinema industries continued their expansion in the 1940s, and the presence of the mariachi in national life increased. The advent of television in the 1950s further centralized the creation and diffusion of culture. The mariachi, through its adaptation to these revolutionary changes and its inclusion in the products of popular culture, maintained an identity connected to its rural origins and everyday people's joys, passions, and problems.

Over time, urban growth and the electronic media drove a transformation of the rural mariachi, which evolved from ensembles of three to five musicians emanating from small towns in Jalisco and surrounding states, to groups of eight or more musicians based primarily in large cities. Local mariachi instrumentation, particularly the "lowland" (*abajero*) style with *guitarrón* (large bass guitar), *guitarra de golpe* (five-stringed, flatbacked guitar), or *vihuela* (five-stringed guitar with a round, spined back), and violins melded with the "highland" (*arribeño*) style, which preferred the large harp over the *guitarrón*. A single trumpet was added to the ensemble in the 1930s, and during the 1950s, two trumpets became more the

standard. From the mid 1950s to the present, the preeminent model for modern mariachi groups has been Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. Originating in 1898 in Tecalitlán, Jalisco, it relocated to Mexico City in the 1930s, and, under the leadership of the late Silvestre Vargas (1901–1985), achieved great success, appearing in some 200 films and making countless recordings with RCA Victor of Mexico and other labels (Clark 1992:7).

Today, the typical mariachi ensemble consists of two trumpets, three violins, a *guitarrón*, a *vihuela*, and a six-stringed guitar. To this instrumentation, the *mariachi de lujo* (deluxe mariachi, like Mariachi Vargas and Los Camperos) typically adds three violins and a harp. The latter half of the 20th century saw further experimentation with other instruments—flutes, for example—by mariachi arrangers, but no lasting innovations in instrumentation have occurred since the 1950s.

The mariachi repertoire also has evolved. The fast-paced, syncopated *son*, once the staple of the mariachi repertoire, has been relegated to being but one of many musical genres played by mariachis. The *canción ranchera*, with its focus on a solo singer's vocal expression, came to dominate the song repertoire in the 1950s. The prolific singer-songwriter José Alfredo Jiménez composed hundreds of *canciones rancheras* that entered the repertoire of professional mariachi groups. The suavely interpreted, romantic bolero, popular in Mexico since the 1920s, has been a major category of mariachi song since the late 1950s. The *huapango*, inspired by the distinctive rhythms, complex violin playing, and falsetto vocal ornaments of the folk *huapango* of the Huastecan region in northeastern

Mexico, is also an important vehicle of mariachi song. Polkas, *pasodobles*, waltzes, schottisches, melodies from regional Mexican and Latin American folk-music traditions, zarzuelas and opera overtures (for example, *La Boda de Luis Alonso* and *Poet and Peasant* overtures), and other forms have been arranged for mariachi. More recently, mariachis have taken up *cumbias* and *merengues* from the Latin Caribbean, as well as North American rap.

Nati Cano and Mariachi Los Camperos

During an interview on 7 August 1999, Nati Cano recounted many of the turning points of his musical career and revealed his vision for the future of mariachi music. He spoke in Spanish, but here I have translated his remarks into English. Natividad “Nati” Cano was born 23 July 1933 in Ahuiculco, Jalisco, a small, rural town an hour’s drive from Guadalajara. His father, Sotero, and his grandfather, Catarino Cano, were *jornaleros*, (day laborers) who played mariachi music at night. Catarino was a self-taught *guitarrón* player, and Sotero was a versatile musician, skilled in playing the *guitarrón*, the *vihuela*, and the violin. Sotero began teaching Nati to play the *vihuela* when Nati was six years old, and by the time he was eight, he was playing professionally in cantinas with his father and grandfather. Nati remembers how at the time, he was so short that the *vihuela* hung down almost to his ankles. He also remembers a painful experience that would remain with him for the rest of his life: “I lived following my father and my grandfather around...in the cantinas.... I saw the signs upon entering [the cantinas] that said ‘WOMEN, MEN IN UNIFORM, BEGGARS, STREET VENDORS, MARIACHIS, AND DOGS NOT ALLOWED.’ Back then, I was simply the group’s boy,

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whom they sent around to offer music to the tourists or to the clients in the cantinas. So you see, I had to walk across the barroom to get to where the clients were. And before I got to the middle of the room, they told me, ‘No, no, no, no! Get out of here, get out of here!’... And, well, this stayed very, very, very engraved in my mind.” Later in life, this and similar experiences with the social disparagement of mariachi music and musicians would motivate him to change these attitudes.

That same year, Nati’s father enrolled him in the Academia de Música in Guadalajara, where he studied violin for the next six years. He showed promise, and one day “My maestro spoke with my father,...because at the time, I worked with them, going around the cantinas and all. We would finish at eleven, twelve at night.... It was difficult to go to school in the morning. And then [after regular school] I had to go to the music school. There was not enough time.... And the maestro told my father,...‘Don’t takê him to work with you. Look, I won’t charge you anything. Let me teach him, because this boy has talent.’ [My family] is large, and we had to make money to live. I didn’t understand at the time. I was only ten or eleven years old.”

Even as a youth, he felt the attraction of Los Angeles. “[I] began to dream of coming to Los Angeles. Around then, and precisely for the reason that we [mariachis] were ignored and mistreated—the symphony musicians, the philharmonic, saw us as musicians and music that weren’t worth anything, no? Ironic, because in New York in Lincoln Center [the symphony musicians] told us ‘This music is difficult. It’s very pretty!’ Well, they looked down on us like that, and it pained me deeply because I

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adored and I still very much adore mariachi music. So, probably to rid myself of that...curse, I studied classical music.... Then I began to play with a group, I was about ten years old, with a classical group, a quartet. ... And we played classical music, and the people requested music, let's say, like from *La Traviata* or *Rigoletto*, and...we would play. People hired us for house parties,...and around that time I gained maturity, more maturity in learning. This was of great use to me,...being able to absorb the two musical cultures, and one helped the other.”

“And then later they invited me to play in a group that imitated a [popular] group that existed in Guadalajara called Los Hermanos Reyes, a modern group, three violins and a bass,...one guitar, and very good, very good, very professional.... I'm talking about 1950, 49, 50. Then, ...director of Mariachi Chapala came by to enlist another one of the guys in that group.... He wanted to go to the city of Mexicali...to play with Mariachi Chapala, but his father did not let him go. And then he told them, ‘Well, take Nati, he knows mariachi music, he plays mariachi music.’ [The director said] ‘Oh, yeah? Well, do you want to go?’ ‘I'll go!’ Without asking my father, I told him, ‘Yes, I'll go.’... And I told my father that I wanted to go to Mexicali, that is, I knew that Mexicali was near to Los Angeles.... My father did not want [me to go], but my mother knew me...and told him, ‘You know what? It's better that you give him your blessing, because I know he's going to go anyway.’ And I was going to go, ...and I went.”

“Things went well for me, because they accepted me fully, and eventually I became the musical director of the group. Mr. Esteban Hernández was

there, who is the father of José Hernández [now the director of Mariachi Sol de México, a prominent group in Los Angeles]. Unfortunately, it was a group that didn't have...[enough] ambition [for me].... My motor was really running! And then a man named José Chávez came to invite us to play in a place in Los Angeles called El Granada, there on Broadway...and Ord streets, right next to Chinatown. So I said, ‘Let's go.’ [Members of the group said,] ‘No, it's too far away.’ ‘Let's go, let's go, let's go.’” Nati and Mariachi Chapala would relocate to Los Angeles in 1957.

Mexicali, still a small town in the 1950s, supported only a few musical groups. It was the time when the trumpet was becoming a standard part of the instrumentation: “There was a trumpet, just one.... It was the fashion at the time. It wasn't until when Miguel Aceves Mejía appeared, recording with Mariachi México de Pepe Villa, when they started to come out with [two] trumpets. And then Vargas came out with trumpets as well, and the rest is history.” Around the time when Mariachi Chapala arrived at Los Angeles in 1957, Nati remembers only one other group based in Los Angeles, Mariachi Los Reyes de Chapala (The Chapala Kings). Chapala is a picturesque lake and community near Guadalajara.

El Granada was a combination bar and restaurant. Nati estimates that 95% of the clientele were Mexicans, “and I would say from Mexico. I think they were workers. At that time, immigration was not as strict as it is now.... It was very easy to cross the border.... Every once in a while, an American would show up, a tourist and all that, but there were very few. What I did not like about it was that we had to be there playing, if the people put a dollar in the kitty—we had one there, [in the shape of] a cat—he would

put in a dollar and we had to play the song he requested. And sometimes we had to play the same song five times. And I didn't like that.... Sometimes a customer would show up, say, the American who likes the song "Granada." And sometimes we had to play the song for him four or five times.... That was the situation that I didn't like. We were like, excuse the expression, like prostitutes there. We could not enjoy the music artistically, because we had to fulfill a purchase—buy and sell, buy and sell.”

Nati also recalls the *al talón* system of mariachi work in Los Angeles. *Talón* literally translates as “heel,” referring to how mariachis walk from cantina to cantina, customer to customer, looking for clients who will hire them, paying by the song. While his group did not work in this fashion, he remembers that in the late 1950s two or three other groups did. “One was in a cantina that was famous in those days,...around 1959. It was called Rosita, it was near Brooklyn Avenue [now César Chávez Avenue] and First Street, I'm not sure, but it was in East Los Angeles.”

New opportunities, dissatisfaction with the work at El Granada, and his artistic restlessness would set the stage for the creation of Los Camperos. “Back then [around 1959], the Million Dollar Theater existed; it was the maximum...[Someone would ask,] ‘Where are you going to play?’ ‘At the Million Dollar.’ ‘Oh, at the Million Dollar!’ The Mariachi Águila was there,...the house mariachi. It was a mariachi that was well established and all. I was having problems because in [Mariachi] Chapala, they would give us chairs,...and we would play sitting down...[Since] the people were dancing, not looking, the decision of the director, who was Leopoldo Soza,...was that we would play sitting down. And I would say, ‘No, stand

up. The mariachi should be standing up.’ I had never played sitting down, never. Only in the symphony you play sitting down. The mariachi doesn't play sitting down.... So I was very discontented, by the lack of aggressiveness, the lack of a challenge, something better. It was a routine, a weekly salary, which offered no incentive: there was no artistic pride; it was merely a purchase and a sale.... At one point, the director [of Mariachi Águila] said, ‘Why don't you help us out [sit in with us at a concert]?’ ‘Because you haven't invited me.’ And they invited me. Well, the next week, when I returned to El Granada Restaurant, they were angry at me because I went to help out Mariachi Águila. I said, ‘Just a moment,...the rest of you [help them out], and why not me?’ That is, it was like having a family of four kids, and three can go out and play, but one cannot.... I got really angry, because it was unfair, and that's how the problems got started.... But I did not leave because of that. I left because I did not see in [Mariachi] Chapala the desire to be better. They were happy with eating and sleeping.... And I wanted the world.... And I finally left the group.”

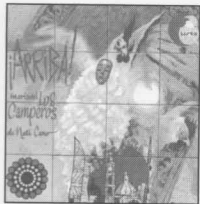
“It was in 1960. There were only two or three mariachis [that I knew of]. I joined Mariachi Águila, but Mariachi Águila wasn't based in a restaurant or cantina. They went here and there. They were the ones who went on tours with artists and all that...[The group] had an average of eight or nine [musicians]. In those days, you couldn't support a deluxe group like now that have twelve,...one trumpet, three or four violins, *guitarrón*, *vihuela*, guitar. That was the instrumentation.... I don't know if it was destiny,...or if God has that power. I don't know. I was very well received in Mariachi Águila, very well received. Unfortunately, the director died in



a traffic accident in Chihuahua, José Frías... We were all on vacation when we got word. And then we got together to see what was going to happen, and all of us were like, 'So now what will happen?' The owner of the Million Dollar then was Frank Fouce.... I am greatly indebted to him because he helped me a lot, a lot, a lot. [Everyone was asking,] 'Who will be the new director?' And, well, everyone said, 'Nati, Nati, Nati, Nati....' And I told them, 'Well, yes, and no. Yes, because I want to do something, but no, because I won't accept things as they were.... We have to improve; we have to be something more, more.' 'No [they said], the truth is, yes, we are with you....' 'OK,' I said, but I told them that things were going to be different.... And I talked to Mr. Fouce, and I asked for a loan to go to Mexico to buy *trajes* [uniforms]. I made a drastic change. It was the first mariachi to use the white jacket. [The *trajes* had been] rustic style, and the basic black traje that we all use now, you see?... [Not having the financial resources to buy finely tailored, very expensive *trajes*, like those that Mariachi Vargas wore in the movies], I started with the tricks, the impact, the techniques of the stage.... Look for the colors that work for the stage—white jacket and black pants.... The impact was the white jacket...that gave the impact of youth, of joy, instead of somberness, even though the *traje de gala* [black *traje* with silver-ornamented pants] is a beautiful thing, no? I started to look for colors to have an impact.... I took the reins of that group in 1961...[In Mexico, white jackets were not used.] That followed later.... It didn't start in Mexico; it started here. And from here, it went there. No, I have it documented on 8-millimeter film that we started the idea of mariachi [stage] movement. Not jumping or dancing, no. Movement. Instead of being stationary, like soldiers, we

started moving around. The third dimension,...group choreography. We began to react to the rhythm. If we had to play a rhythm, say, [with] the influence of the mambo, of the *chachachá*—we didn't play *chachachá*, no, but there were songs that had some of the rhythmic influence.... You can play 'Guantanamera' without moving, or you can do 'Guantanamera' [he sings] and do this—react to the breeze, to the wind, if the wind hits you, open your arms so that the wind blankets your whole body, yes? We started with that."

With Cano as leader starting in 1961, the public profile of the group rose. That year, he renamed the group Mariachi Los Camperos. At the Million Dollar Theater and on tours throughout the western United States, Los Camperos accompanied many of the most famous interpreters of *música ranchera* of the time, including Lola Beltrán, José Alfredo Jiménez, Miguel Aceves Mejía, Amalia Mendoza, and Javier Solís. In 1961, the mayor of Catalina Island contracted them to play on the ferry that took tourists back and forth to the mainland. In 1962, they were hired the first of many times to play in Las Vegas. Until 1965, they used the Salón Azteca on Figueroa Street in downtown L.A. as a base when they had no other performances scheduled. Key to their success was Nati's insistence on discipline: if musicians didn't show up for work or didn't control their drinking, they were replaced. "I never prohibited them from drinking. What I am against is abuse.... When they... were working, they weren't going to a picnic to get drunk; they were going to work.... When it turns into a lack of discipline, that is, when one loses his own self-respect, then I'm not in agreement." The group rehearsed an average of three or four hours each day.



Commercial success in the United States often required playing for audiences with different tastes and less familiarity with mariachi music than audiences in Mexico. Cano was keenly aware of the need to connect with these audiences and searched for where to draw the line between “crossing over” and keeping tradition. His first stand in Las Vegas was instructive: “Carlos Valadez, not a ranchero artist, not a mariachi artist, but a theatrical artist, like in the movies, [contacted us]... He took us to Las Vegas, he as a soloist, and we accompanying him. The people did not like him, because he started in with his very modern [American] repertoire, dancing, no? And the people were aware of Mexican culture.... Just like people know of the balalaika, they know instruments of different countries, there are people who know Irish music, you understand? There were people who know about Mexican culture. Not with the popularity of today, but they were educated about that, no? And it got to the point where the people didn’t applaud him. They applauded the mariachi, but not him. He would just come out and sing two or three songs, and the people, well [he applauds unenthusiastically]. So, he...said, ‘You go ahead, Nati,’ because we had to play 45 minutes—a concert. We were alternating back then with Della Reese, Ray Anthony, Harry James!... Obviously, the management realized that he was not doing well, and they came to us. They didn’t contract him. They contracted us.... There were contracts for four weeks, three weeks.... It was a show, like now.... Well, we had experience at the Million Dollar, so the stage was not new to us.”

Another Las Vegas experience further shaped his thinking: “Back then, one of my best musicians, Clemente, he played *guitarrón*, very good, a model of respect, pride, class,...dignity, and I had him sing a song,

‘Solamente una vez,’ in English—‘You Belong to My Heart.’... And when the set ended, a gentleman came up to me and said,... ‘Look, we like Mexican music,’ he said, ‘but don’t sing in English. If we want music in English or some other music, we’ll go to some other place. We came here to hear the music of Mexico.’ And that stayed engraved in my mind.... Because whatever success we have had has been precisely because of that, through preserving the integrity of traditional music.”

During the first half of their 4-year history, Los Camperos experimented with innovation, recording albums with English lyrics, including novelty numbers in English in their concerts, and pushing the envelope of stage movement. Many of their innovations were adopted by other mariachi groups, some of which took them to greater extremes. Partly as a reaction to these extremes, Nati Cano and Los Camperos in later years have placed greater attention on maintaining tradition, on preserving the essential mariachi sound.

Cano explains his philosophy concerning innovation and change in composing, arranging, and presenting: “When [people] ask me, ‘What do you think of this mariachi or that mariachi? what do you think of the change?’ And I tell them, look, we should not all be alike. It is not good for humanity that everything be the same. But there are limits. There is a limit that says this is not what it’s supposed to be. It’s something else. I tell it to them like this. The taco. The taco, aside from the mariachi and tequila, is the worldwide image of Mexico, isn’t that right? Good. On the taco, put *salsa de tomate*, put *salsa verde*,...put *salsa de chipotle*, put the *salsa* that you want. Just don’t put ketchup on it. That’s how I explain it,

because that is the limit.... The other day, a woman said to me, 'You know, the other day I saw a mariachi, how good they were. You should have seen how well they danced!' Look, [it's] 1999, and the mariachi has to be seen as good because it dances?... A student once asked me, 'Maestro, maestro,' he said, 'Can I play "El Mariachi Loco" [The Crazy Mariachi—a popular cumbia]?' And I told him, 'Yes, but I also want you to play "Los Arrieros" [a rhythmically complex *son*—track 1] or a *son jalisciense*....' I don't think it would be right if, after all the sacrifices, by so many great mariachi musicians, the history of Mariachi Vargas and [Mariachi] Marmolejo, by all these people...wouldn't it be wrong if we ended up with a Taco Bell image? My due respect to Taco Bell, no? But if it's *Mexican* food [we want], where are we going to go?"

In the early years of Los Camperos, Cano looked to the most successful mariachi, Mariachi Vargas, for ideas to improve the group's appeal. "Mariachi Vargas didn't know it, but I was following them around. They accompanied...all the great artists too. Well, I would go and spend a week in Mexico, just following them around. I learned from them." When he was a youth, he would stand in the doorway of the cantinas and listen to the individual maestros to learn from them. But what Mariachi Vargas offered was the large group sound, with six violins, two trumpets, and harp, along with the *guitarrón*, *vibuela*, and guitar. This was the sound he was after. "But they also worked accompanying [others]; they were always in second place, in the back. And...here in the United States, it was when I started [to want the mariachi to play] alone. Alone."

He moved closer to making this happen: "I was certain the mariachi could go independent, work on its own.... Then, what made me decide to no longer accompany singing artists, unless it would be a critical necessity, no?... One day we were in the Million Dollar Theater, and since I was directing the mariachi—I knew which song came next and all—the artist [Francisco "Charro" Avitia, a famous singer] asked me,... 'Which one is next?' I said, 'Such and such is next,' and he yelled at me in a nasty way, he told me, 'Not that one!'...there in front of the people, and it upset me [because of the way we had been treated in Guadalajara]. And I told him, 'Well then, whichever one you want, we'll play that one.... You tell us which one is next.' 'Then we won't sing,' he said. [And I said,] 'Then we won't sing.' And since the mariachi's discipline was such that if I were to lower my violin, everyone lowered their violin.... Imagine it, we're playing and the director lowers his violin, and everyone lowers their violin.... One or two minutes went by, and the people started in with 'Why don't you play, what's going on with the show?'... All the people were whistling and yelling, and he was standing there, and he didn't want to sing.... We already had offers to work alone." Cano and Los Camperos left the Million Dollar. It was around 1968, the year they formed a corporation to open their own restaurant, La Fonda del Los Camperos.

"We were traveling a lot.... I was beginning to realize that the guys were away from their families for a lot of the time, and everyone had wives, families, kids, and I was thinking that they had to be home,...thinking I had to do something. [And I remembered an experience in 1962, when] we were in [Lubbock,] Texas, with Miguel Aceves Mejía. The concert ended, and...Clemente told me, 'You know, they don't like Mexicans

here.' 'And why?' I asked. 'I don't know,' he said.... The [racial] problem was with the African Americans, no? They didn't like them, they had to sit in the back of the bus and all that, no? But Texas? 'Texas used to be part of Mexico, no?' 'Well, yes, but they don't like Mexicans here.'... So we went to a restaurant, and upon entering, I looked in and saw a black man in back washing dishes, and I said, 'Well, if they let him in, [they'll let] us in, too.' The problem was with them, no? And when we entered, I will never forget it, a [white] waitress...saw us and gave us a look, and I said, 'Uh-oh.' And we stood there and the maitre-d' came and asked, 'Can we help you?' And I said, 'We want to have dinner.' He told me 'Look,' in English, he told me, 'Look, two blocks from here there is a restaurant with Spanish prices.' I told him,...'No, I'm not asking about the prices, we'll pay whatever it costs.' And he told me very calmly,...'Look, buddy, we don't serve Mexicans!'... And I, coming from Mexico, where they don't admit...[remembering his early cantina experience]...the same thing, but in a racial way.... Then we went back to the hotel, and I couldn't sleep, I didn't sleep at all.... And I told Clemente, 'You know what? One day I'm going to have a place. It's going to be a place where people of all colors will go, of all flavors, from all countries will come to see us.' And that day, La Fonda was born."

In 1967, the members of Los Camperos were making good money. They belonged to the Musicians' Union; Cano believed in the retirement and other benefits it offered. They gathered their money together, borrowed from friends, and leased a burned-out building at 2501 Wilshire Boulevard, the site of La Fonda today. The beginning was uncertain: because of the fire damage, the costs of the renovations were much higher

than they had expected. "I sat down and cried in 1968, right where the stage is now." But soon after it opened, it was a major success, quickly becoming a favorite nightspot, and eventually serving as a model for others. In fact, La Fonda is one of Cano's most successful innovations—a dinner theatre setting where people of all ages and backgrounds would feel comfortable, and where the mariachi, alone, was the main event. Other similar restaurants followed, and the demand for mariachis in restaurants grew. The cornerstone of Nati Cano's dream had become a reality and continues today, more than three decades later.

With the growth of the Latino population in the United States, especially in Los Angeles, the popularity of live mariachi music continues to increase. The successful recording *Canciones de mi Padre* (1987) and national tours by Linda Ronstadt singing *música ranchera* with mariachi, often accompanied by Los Camperos, boosted this popularity significantly. Mariachi programs in schools, begun in California and Texas in the 1960s, now number in the hundreds. A major festival with instructional workshops, launched in San Antonio, Texas, in 1979 by Belle San Miguel-Ortiz, quickly became a model for festivals that sprang up in Tucson, Arizona; Fresno, California; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and elsewhere. Today, dozens of annual mariachi festivals occur throughout the southwestern United States. Mariachi Los Camperos has been a key ingredient to the success of many of them. In 1989, Nati Cano received the highest honor the United States government offers in the field of traditional arts—the National Heritage Fellowship of the National Endowment for the Arts. He often mentions that the award marked a turning point in his career, when he began to devote more of his effort to the preservation of the mariachi tradition and to the education of young people.



Today, Nati Cano takes great satisfaction in the progress made by the mariachi in gaining greater social and musical respect. But he is still not satisfied. “I joke around—you’ve heard me once in New York, in Lincoln Center. When I talk to the audience, I say, . . . ‘We played at Lincoln Center, in New York,’ and I say, ‘*Inside*,’ I say, ‘*Inside*.’ . . . Because many people would say ‘Oh, I went to play at the Music Center here in Los Angeles,’—yes, but *outside*, when the people were arriving, like a party. We were good enough to be outside, but not for inside. . . . It was when Linda Ronstadt did her recording of *Canciones de mi Padre* together with the concert, when the people suddenly said, ‘Hey, this music belongs in the concert hall.’”

—Daniel Sheehy

The Songs

1. Los Arrieros (The Muleteers) *son jalisciense*

This is one of the most rhythmically complex *sones* in the mariachi repertoire. Earlier versions of this piece heard in rural areas of Jalisco most likely predate the 20th century. Mariachi Vargas recorded their version in the 1950s, resulting in its inclusion in the contemporary repertoire of more technically accomplished ensembles.

2. San Miguel El Alto *canción ranchera*

San Miguel El Alto is a town in the state of Jalisco. The *canción ranchera* is most often cast in a fast 2/4 meter as in this piece or a 3/4 waltzlike meter. Many early 20th-century *canciones rancheras* were tributes to particular songs or regions. This one starts out, “I am from San Miguel El Alto. It’s my land, and there I was born. I am a true *charro* [cowboy], I’m not

boasting. [It’s] where they offer friendship, where there are valiant men, where you really feel at peace.”

3. Se Me Hizo Fácil (It Was Easy for Me) *canción ranchera*

This old *canción ranchera* in a 3/4 waltz meter tells of a man trying to forget the lover who abandoned him. “It was easy for me to erase from my memory that woman whom I loved so much. It was easy for me to erase the crying. Now I love her each day more and more.”

4. El Gustito (The Little Pleasure) *huapango*

The *huapango* originated as a variety of regional *son*, from a cultural and geographic region known as the Huasteca, which overlaps several states in northeastern Mexico, mainly southern Tamaulipas, northern Veracruz, and San Luis Potosí. Its distinctive rhythm was incorporated into the repertoires of other regional ensembles, including accordion-driven *norteño* groups and the mariachi. The traditional fashion of the *trío huasteco*, comprising two regional guitars and a violin, emphasizes rhythmically complex, semi-improvised violin playing and falsetto vocal ornaments. “El Gustito” is part of the traditional Huastecan repertoire, though it has been credited to violinist Elpidio Ramírez, who brought a certain degree of public prominence to the music beginning in the late 1930s. “El Gustito” has previously been arranged and recorded by mariachis, but this arrangement by Los Camperos attempts more faithfully to capture the Huastecan character of the solo violin, set to the mariachi version of the *huapango* rhythm. The solo violinist and lead singer is Jesús “Chuy” Guzmán, the group’s musical director. “I was singing ‘El Gustito’ when I fell asleep. My mother woke me up, I acted like I didn’t understand so that she might let me dream of you a little longer.”

5. Gema (The Gem) bolero

The bolero, with origins in eastern Cuba in the late 19th century, arrived in Mexico shortly thereafter and was adapted to Mexican tastes. The three-part harmonies and mellifluous voices of the *trío romántico*, most popular from the 1940s through 1960s, marked an urban Mexican bolero style and repertoire. A similar *bolero ranchero* (country bolero) style emerged for the mariachi, epitomized by the recordings of singer Javier Solís. In this rendition of the now classic bolero “Gema,” Los Camperos emulate the vocal harmonies of the *trío romántico*. The text closes, “You are the gem that God converted into a woman to make my life better. Because of that, I wanted to sing and to shout that I love you, beloved woman; because of that, I raise my voice, blessing your name and asking for your love.”

6. El Autlense (The Man from Autlán) *son jalisciense*

This instrumental *son jalisciense* takes its name from the town of Autlán, in the lowlands of Jalisco. This arrangement gives the *armonía* (harmony) section the opportunity to be heard. The *armonías* are the *guitarrón*, *vihuela*, and guitar. The violins and trumpets are referred to as *melodías*, and the *arpa* plays both bass and melody.

7. Paloma Negra (Black Dove) *canción ranchera*

This much-recorded, favorite *canción ranchera*, composed by one of its leading songwriters, epitomizes the genre’s highly emotional singing style. “I’m tired of crying, and the dawn still doesn’t come. I don’t know whether to curse you or to pray for you. I’m afraid to look for you and to find you where my friends tell me that you are.... You decided for yourself to go on a drunken spree. Black dove, black dove, where are you?... Even though I

love you, don’t return. You are the bars of my prison. I want to be free, to live my life with whomever I want. God give me strength, because I am dying to go search for her.”

8. Ojitos Verdes (Green Eyes) *canción ranchera*

“Ojitos Verdes” is another chestnut of the *ranchera* repertoire. “Those green eyes, whom are they with? I hope they remember me, even if only every once in a while.”

9. Árboles de la Barranca (The Trees of the Ravine) *canción ranchera*

The brass band (*banda*) has been popular throughout Mexico since the mid 19th century. In some regions, as in the western Mexican states of Sinaloa and Zacatecas, it is thought of as the signature regional folk-music style. In recent decades, creating and performing arrangements emulating or parodying these regional *banda* styles has been common in mariachi music. The prominence of the harp evokes the sound of the mariachi’s early rural roots. “Trees of the ravine, why haven’t you turned green? It’s that they haven’t watered you with the water from the flowery river.”

10. La Malagueña (The Woman from Málaga) *huapango*

“La Malagueña” is among the most popular songs of the mariachi repertoire, popular for its showy display of vocal falsetto technique. Luis Damián, *vihuela* player and singer of Los Camperos for more than thirty years, interprets.

11. Virgencita de Talpa (Virgin of Talpa) *canción*

The *danza* rhythm heard here originated in the Mexican renditions of the rhythm imported from Cuba in the later 19th century, when it was one of

the most common underlying meters for dances and sentimental songs such as this one. The singer prays to the Virgin of Talpa to return his love, lost through some fault of his own: "I come to ask of you, dear Virgin of Talpa, that you love me again, that you not be ungrateful. I have come to your altar to ask a miracle of you, that your heart not despise me. With holy devotion, on my knees, I implore your pardon for my sin."

12. Que Te Vas, Te Vas (You Say You Are Going Away) *son*

This exemplifies the many popular songs composed by professional songwriters in the rhythm of the *son*. "You say you are leaving, you are leaving, you are leaving, never to return."

13. Amor Ciego (Blind Love) *bolero*

This is another bolero evoking the *trío romántico* style, recalling the lush harmonies and vocal and instrumental sounds of the early Cuban-influenced bolero. Muted trumpet was common in the more Cuban-styled bolero, and the smaller six-stringed guitar called *requinto* was the principal melody instrument of the Mexican *trío romántico*. Today, the *trío romántico* sound is considered an important part of the Mexican musical heritage, one of the reasons Nati Cano aims to preserve its sound in the music of Los Camperos. "No, don't leave me alone. Look, I will die if you are not with me."

14. El Jilguerrillo (The Goldfinch) *son jalisciense*

This is a classic old *son*, arranged by Los Camperos with new ornamental instrumental melodies and sectional structure. It is one of the few *sones* with a section in the minor mode, here played with violin pizzicato. The

jilguero has bright yellow plumage, with black forehead, wings, and tail. "Fly, fly, little goldfinch, bright ray of sunlight. Take this little paper note to the one to whom my love belongs."

15. Tequila con Limón (Tequila with Lime) *canción ranchera/son*

This song combines the 3/4 waltz rhythm of the *canción ranchera* with that of the *son*. It dates from Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema (1930s–1950s), when *charro* singers with operatic training starred as protagonists of movies with dramatic plots set on ranches, singers such as Jorge Negrete, who made this song famous. "I bring music in my soul, and a song here in my chest, a song that carries me away when I sing it with love."

16. Entre Suspiro y Suspiro (Between Sigh and Sigh) *canción ranchera*

This is a fresh arrangement of another tragic love-ridden *ranchera*, highlighting the powerful voices of Luis Damián and Arturo Palacios. "Between sigh and sigh, I can't find oblivion. Love is killing me, because an ungrateful, deceitful woman, who tortures my soul, hurts me with her disdain."

17. El Cihualteco (The Man from Cihuatlán) *son jalisciense*

"El Cihualteco" exemplifies the syncopated sound of the *son jalisciense* at its most exciting. "Above Cihuatlán, they call it Hidden Lake, where the cherished women from Cihuatlán go to bathe."



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