



# Ancient Aztec Myths, Cowboy Mice, and Dancing Iguanas: Sones de Mexico Ensemble Creates a Fiesta Mexicana for Children

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What do a crawfish, a cowboy mouse, and a 100-year-old woman have in common? They are all characters in ***Fiesta Mexicana: Mexican Songs & Stories for Niños & Niñas and their Papás & Mamás*** (release April 2010), the latest recording by Sones de Mexico Ensemble.

The same band that three years ago ventured into uncharted waters with Mexican folk retoolings of Led Zeppelin's "Four Sticks" and J.S. Bach's "Brandenburg 3-2" for their GRAMMY™ and Latin GRAMMY™ nominated album *Esta Tierra Es Tuya (This Land Is Your Land)* now digs deep into Mexican folklore. The sextet, formed by **Victor Pichardo** (music director), **Juan Díes** (producer), **Lorena Iñiguez**, **Juan Rivera**, **Zacbé Pichardo**, and **Javier Saume** offers something new to a generation of kids that is growing up in a globalized world: a bilingual, double album for the 21st Century with 44 tracks that include songs over 300-years-old, fantastic characters, and children's entertainers **Dan Zanes** and **Ella Jenkins** as special guests singing in Spanish.

As Mexico celebrates its 200th birthday

in 2010, *Fiesta Mexicana* addresses a "gap in quality educational programming," says producer and bassist Juan Díes.

According to a recent Pew Research Center report, "Hispanics now make up 22% of all children under the age of 18 in the United States—up from 9% in 1980—...A majority (52%) of the nation's 16 million Hispanic children are now 'second generation,' meaning they are the U.S.-born sons or daughters of at least one foreign-born parent."

"Parents and educators often complain about the lack of quality programs and materials to help kids of Mexican ancestry maintain a connection to their family's roots," says Díes. "Our response is *Fiesta Mexicana*."

But *Fiesta Mexicana* does not only address Mexican-American kids, says Díes. "It's for everyone who lives in this bilingual and bicultural environment." The lessons are universal, not just about Mexican cul-

ture; he adds, "kids learn about tempo in music, about loving animals, and about the importance of balance in the world and in one's self." "We are educators at heart," says music director Víctor Pichardo, who was brought to Chicago 17 years ago by an arts education organiza-



tion and conceived *Fiesta Mexicana* to teach children about Mexican heritage through story and song.

Sones de Mexico Ensemble began performing this educational program in Chicago schools in 1994 and as demand grew took it to audiences throughout the country. “Over the years,” Díes remarks, “this program has been polished like a pebble in a stream, evolving as the band has responded to the reactions of kids.”

Taking audiences of all ages on a musical tour of Mexico, the program incorporates a diverse range of acoustic folk music and folklore from several regions of the country, even including lesser-known Aztec, Mayan, Zoque, and



P’urhépecha traditions. “We have a profound respect for the indigenous peoples of Mexico,” Pichardo says, “because their art expresses something very deep. One way to honor them is to include these kinds of works in our program.”

To also address the needs of American children who are growing up in an increasingly bilingual nation, *Fiesta Mexicana* is a double album, one disc in English and one in Spanish. “Kids are being exposed to both languages,” Díes notes, “in a way that their parents were not. This is not only happening in big cities but also smaller U.S. towns. Many older generation Mexican Americans who grew up in the U.S. 20 or more years ago regret that their parents or their schools never encouraged them to cultivate Spanish or their Mexican heritage; some of them even try to regain both as adults. We see them among our fans, and we open our arms to them. Remarkably, we now run into (non-Hispanic) white or African American children

in the schools who walk up and speak Spanish to us because they think it is cool. Clearly and increasingly, it’s not shameful for kids in schools nowadays to have a foreign identity. You don’t have to check it at the door at Ellis Island.”

In this spirit, *Fiesta Mexicana* invites anyone interested in good, fun music and stories for any age to join this musical adventure. As a showcase of traditional and classic Mexican folk tunes, it can also work as a celebration of identity and pride for young Mexican-Americans.

“Sometimes after a show,” Díes recalls, “a kid will come up to me and tug on my shirt, and say ‘Hey, I’m Mexican!’ After seeing our show, they feel proud to be Mexican, maybe for the first time.”

Sones de Mexico Ensemble dancer and percussionist Lorena Iñiguez recalls that during a workshop, when she was asked how she got started, she replied that she began dancing with Grupo Netzahualcóyotl (named after the pre-Columbian poet-king), and a child jumped up and said, “Hey, that’s my name!” “Apparently,” she remarks, “the boy had always suffered with this Aztec name because it was different and hard for others to pronounce, and kids made fun of him. But, for this moment, the boy could feel proud of his name and heritage.” “When we perform at schools, students from Mexican parents go out of their way to raise their hands. It brings them a sense of belonging.”

The recording captures the excitement of Sones de Mexico Ensemble’s live performances and draws listeners in as it educates them about Mexican folklore, music, and cosmology through stories and songs.



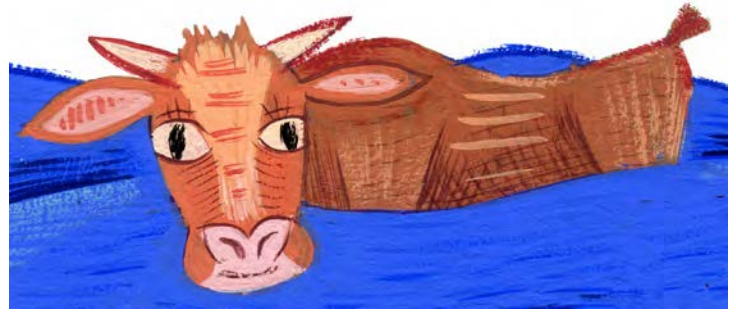
The double-set CD opens and closes with two original compositions by music director Víctor Pichardo (who also arranges, sings and plays various guitars, woodwinds and percussion on the album): “Saludo Jarabeado” (an overture) and “Viñuete” (a lullaby). After the festive overture, which features horn and violin melodies over a fast circus of rhythm, the program moves to an introduction by Juan Díes, who narrates the album and tells stories between musical tracks. Guest instrumentalists include longtime collaborators **Víctor García** (trumpet) and **Steve Eisen** (sax and flute) from the Chicago Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble (CALJE) and renowned Tejano button-accordionist and friend **Sunny Saucedo** from San Antonio, Texas.

After “La Pasión,” a short instrumental prelude, Díes recounts an Aztec creation myth in “How Did It All Begin?,” which reveals the cosmology of these ancient people. Inviting audience



participation, Díes asks the listener to successively face in the four cardinal directions and call upon the earth, wind, fire, and water by shouting their Aztec names as the *atecocolli* (conch shell horn) blows. The ceremony then begins, as the band plays “Xipe,” a dance of renewal. In preparation for the dance, children learn about the importance of balance, both in nature and within themselves, as they are asked to perform dance movements to the right and then to the left in balanced proportion.

After children learn about the sounds and names of the various Aztec instruments in



the Nahuatl language comes “El Torito Coiteco,” an instrumental piece from the Zoque people of Chiapas. The song is about a little bull. It features two band members on the folk *marimba*: Zacbé Pichardo (who also plays harp and percussion in the album) and Javier Saume (who also plays drums and percussion).

The program takes audiences to the lush, tropical Huasteca region of Mexico with a tale about “La Acamaya” (The Crawfish), a feisty little crustacean and her friends who live in the Pánuco River waters. Fiddler Juan Rivera plays several regional styles of folk violin throughout this album, but in this song and the next he plays the Huasteca style of fiddling that is his specialty.

From the state of Veracruz follows a dance called “Los Enanos” (The Little Ones)—a favorite with toddlers. The song asks children to crouch, jump, and twirl like turkeys in a choreography that invariably brings a lot of giggles and laughter.

Exploring a bit of border culture, Sones de Mexico Ensemble recounts the hilarious story of a restless cowboy mouse from Texas and invites the audience to clap along to the lively polka-tinged “El Ratón Vaquero.” Víctor Pichardo sings the tale while guest Sunny Saucedo backs him up on the button accordion for an indisputable border sound. The song was originally written in 1934 by one of Mexico’s most prized children’s music composers, Francisco Gabilondo Soler, better known as “Cri-Cri: The Singing Cricket.”

On “El Trenecito,” the band turns to the indigenous music of Michoacán and brings the *Danzas de Viejitos* (Old Folk’s Dances) to life. This playful song cycle by the late master Tata Gervasio López finds dancers wearing rosy-cheeked masks that make them look like old people. The clown-



like dancers wear loud wooden shoes, hats with colored ribbons, and carry wooden walking canes, going out of their way to cause mischief, pounding on the street with their canes. In *Fiesta Mexicana*, the fictional character of Doña Sabina, a wise 100-year-old woman created by Sones de Mexico Ensemble, teaches the children a lesson about tempo by forming a “human train” with variable speeds.

Rounding off the album, Sones de Mexico Ensemble includes two notable guest performers. Acclaimed children’s musician Dan Zanes appears in the Afro-Mexican song and dance medley “Tixtla.” The medley includes a series of dances where dancers imitate the movements of different animals, including a bull, a buzzard, a duck, a cat, and an iguana. It is believed that freed African slaves brought this playful dancing style to Mexico’s southwestern coast in the 1850s as they made their way from Latin America to California during the Gold Rush. Zanes had asked Sones de Mexico Ensemble to perform with him when he was in Chicago. He had recently spent some time learning folk music in Veracruz, on Mexico’s East coast. The artists kept in touch, and when Sones asked Zanes to perform in their children’s album he eagerly agreed. ““He insisted on singing in Spanish,” Díes recalls. “His sense of adventure reaffirmed our desire to have him on the album.”

The album ends with a double take of “La Bamba.” It begins with a cover of Ritchie Va-

lens’s 1958 rock ‘n’ roll version that comes to a screeching halt, much to everyone’s disappointment, but then it makes way for a second take: a festive finale with a traditional folk version of “La Bamba” from Veracruz, which, according to the 1683 chronicles of the Hacienda Malibrán in Veracruz, may be over 300 years old.

The English side of the album ends with a bonus track featuring renowned children’s music pioneer Ella Jenkins. She lends her seasoned voice in Spanish to “Quiéreme Mucho” a 1931 Cuban song, better known in the U.S. as the melody for “Yours.” After appearing as a guest on *Sharing Cultures* with Ella Jenkins, a Smithsonian Folkways Recordings album, Díes asked Ella to be a guest on *Fiesta Mexicana*. She suggested this Cuban song. After speaking to the audience in Spanish, her smooth, smoky voice glides over a laid back Afro-Cuban groove accessible to listeners of any age.

While most of their fans only know Sones de Mexico as a touring band that plays in theaters, clubs, and festivals, the ensemble has been deeply committed to the education of youth since 1994, becoming a non-profit organization three years later. They have touched the lives of tens of thousands of children for more than 15 years. Continuing to deliver on this commitment, the band is unveiling a new catalog of educational programs coinciding with the release of this album. Whether performing live or through recording, “we want to inspire our audience,” Pichardo says. “We want to motivate people to go further and explore the rich cultural heritage of Mexico.”



## Fiesta Mexicana and Multiple Intelligences

While receiving particular enthusiasm from Mexican-American students, Sones de Mexico Ensemble's educational programs are designed for all children. The live performance of *Fiesta Mexicana* has touched students with a diverse range of identities, aptitudes, and developmental abilities. While conducting an artistic residency at a Chicago school, Iñiguez recalls, "there was this one kid who was out of control. I believe he had attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or a mild case of Down syndrome." The child started following Iñiguez because he was intrigued by the sound of her tap shoes and wanted to sound like her. One day, the student arrived at school with such excitement because he had made his parents put taps on his gym shoes. Iñiguez and the boy's teachers were amazed when he then proceeded to excel at learning the various Mexican dances.

Similarly, Juan Díes recalls that, while doing a class exercise around "Tixtla," one of the songs in the album that is danced by mimicking the movements of various animals, "we got to the point where we ask the kids to be creative and think of an animal they can make up a dance for. I remember a fifth grader that kept raising her hand to volunteer. She came up several times and invented a few new dances: a giraffe, a mosquito, a gorilla, an amoeba... She was really excited and euphoric to be excelling with her creativity. No one else in the class thought of as many animal dances as she did." Díes found out later that the child required a tutor, and was behind her classmates in academics. "I have heard teachers talk about how different 'intelligences' reach different kids," Díes continues, "it was just great to see it firsthand!"

## Maypoles, Pig-heads, and Lullabies: Más About Disc Two

The Spanish side of the album contains a reprise of the "core" songs of *Fiesta Mexicana* with Spanish versions of the narratives, also spoken by Juan Díes. Some of the instrumental songs are different. For instance, the side opens with "Pool Keken" ("Pig-head") a Mayan processional march from Yucatan. It features a parade of all the instruments in orchestral succession. The Aztec dance is now "La Danza del Sol" (The Dance of the Sun), another piece that the ensemble uses to teach about the concept of themes and variations in music and dance. In place of the marimba tune from Chiapas we now find "Los Matlachines de Hidalgo," a fiddle tune used for a Maypole-type dance by the Matlachines, an indigenous group of northern Mexico. The album closes with another bonus track: "Viñuete," a spiritual lullaby "to help infants ascend to heaven," written in a traditional Huasteca style by music director Víctor Pichardo and performed by his son Zacbé Pichardo on solo harp.

