

Mariachi band bets you can't sit still

By Carin Zissis

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"I love their pants," said Greg Burk, referring to the suits worn by Mariachi Mexamerica band members. "I want to get a pair."

Burk hired the band last year to play a surprise serenade for his wife, Serena's, birthday party. Six musicians arrived at their Somerville apartment wearing trajes de charro, the traditional mariachi costume adopted from Mexican charros, or cowboys. The outfit includes pants adorned with silver clasps, a short jacket, a large embroidered bow tie called a muño, and a wide-brimmed sombrero.

"She was thrilled," said Burk of his wife, "and all her friends were jealous that their boyfriends or husbands had never done something similar for them."

"The mariachis sound so good," he added, "and they're portable."

The band's busy summer season heats up today, Cinco de Mayo. Often mistaken for Mexican Independence Day, Cinco de Mayo celebrates the Mexican victory at the 1862 Battle of Puebla, during the period when France installed a monarchy in Mexico. One theory is that the word "mariachi" comes from the French word "mariage" for the music played at Mexican weddings by traveling musicians.

Mariachi Mexamerica continues the traveling tradition, performing at parties throughout New England. The band also plays at high schools and universities. "I think these kids are going to think this is so uncool," said trumpet player Tom Halter. "But they go crazy, they love it."

On Friday and Saturday nights, the group plays Tacos El Charro, the Mexican restaurant near Jamaica Plain's Jackson Square. The restaurant's owner, Pepe Gutierrez, is a guitarist from Jalisco, the Mexican region considered to be the birthplace of mariachi music. He started the band after moving to Boston in 1980.

Mariachi Mexamerica draws from a pool of 12 musicians who play trumpets, violins, guitars, the small five-stringed vihuela, and the bulky guitarrón. Although the music's roots are Mexican, band members come from as far as Argentina.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/PAT GREENHOUSE

Jorge Purizaga belongs to Mariachi Mexamerica, which performs on weekends at Tacos El Charro in Jamaica Plain.

"Mariachi music is very popular in El Salvador," said 56-year-old Salvadoran Juan Jose Portillo, who has played violin, guitar, vihuela, and guitarrón with the group since 1990.

Nineteen-year-old Boston University student Jeffery Cruz played violin with mariachi bands for seven years in his native Tucson. "I was looking online to see if there even were mariachi bands in Boston." He found information about the group, went to hear them at Tacos El Charro, and joined. "I asked them 'Do you need a violin?'" he said, "and told them that I wanted to play."

"When someone new comes,

they bring their repertoire to the group," said Halter. The band plays hundreds of songs, but such familiar tunes as "La Bamba," "La Cucaracha," and "Cielito Lindo" are performed time and time again to audiences encouraged to sing along, even when they don't speak Spanish.

Halter laughed when he said that he often tells restaurant customers, "We're now going to play 'Cielito Lindo,' better known as 'Ay-Ay-Yayay.'"

"Musicians are a really important part of society in Mexico," said Halter. "Here people say, 'Just hire a DJ.'"