

Mariachi Musicians and Collective Grief during the COVID Pandemic in Southern California

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Abstract

During winter 2020–2021, Los Angeles County suffered a brutal third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Latinxs, who account for 49 percent of the local population, were disproportionately devastated by high numbers of COVID-19-positive cases and alarming increases in mortality rates. Despite the popular perception that all musicians were silenced during the pandemic, I draw from my personal experience as a mariachi and those of my musical colleagues to document the impact of systemic marginalisation on the lives of mariachi musicians and how we responded to the pandemic by supporting each other and our community through performances.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its multiple waves and variants, has taken a harrowing toll on people's lives and well-being. Among those whose lives have been severely disrupted are musicians who depend on synchronous, in-person performances and ensemble playing as a primary source of income and emotional connection to others. This article examines two main questions: (1) How do the struggles of mariachi musicians in Los Angeles County, California, reflect the systemic marginalisation of ethnic and racialised groups in the United States? And (2) how did mariachi musicians in the Greater Los Angeles area (see [Figures 1](#) and [2](#)) adapt and respond to the various crises engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic?

This article is a *testimonio*, a personal account that blends autoethnography with participant observation while analysing oppression and calling for action.¹ I write from the

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1. For an overview of testimonios in Chicana and Black feminist literature, see Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012).

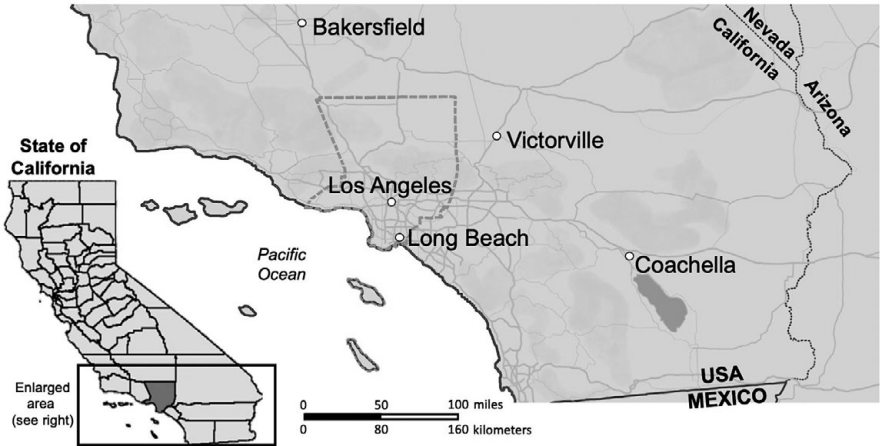


Figure 1. Map of Southern California with Los Angeles County outlined. Note: Los Angeles County is c. 4000 square miles and consists of 88 cities and 140 unincorporated areas.



Figure 2. An enlargement of the Los Angeles Metropolitan area. Sites mentioned in article are indicated.

perspective of having grown up in a working-class community in Syracuse, New York, where we were one of the only Mexican American families in the region.² For the last fifteen years, I have been an active mariachi musician in Southern California, as well as across the United States and Latin America. My current role as a tenured professor of ethnomusicology at a state university now places me in the middle class; however, I often

2. My family is of mixed race. I most strongly identify with my Mexican and Italian ancestry, and I have family from multiple sides who have lived in the Los Angeles area since the early 1900s.

experience the sense of being an out-of-place scholar in academia given my background (cf. Abrego *forthcoming*). This article reflects a composite of my own experiences and those of fellow mariachi musicians who are part of Latinx communities in Southern California.³ I write from the viewpoint of someone who has experienced the traumatic loss of multiple loved ones during the pandemic and who has supported grieving friends and family through music. Many of my experiences are echoed in parallel accounts provided by my colleagues and friends, such as Rodrigo Rodriguez (Mariachi Romanza), Sally Hawkrige and Aurelio Reyes (Mariachi Trio Palenque), several members of Mariachi Lindas Mexicanas, and students of mine, such as Mey Belman, Jesse Flores, Saulo Garcia, Michelle Salinas, and Nate Salvatierra.

Current discussions in applied ethnomusicology focus on ensuring that research methods embody an ethics of care, which we can engage by “walking [or performing] alongside” (Dirksen 2023, 214) our research collaborators. As some researchers have pointed out, ethical issues may arise when scholars align with some or all of the values held by a community without fully reflecting on their own biases or research use intentions (Harrison 2020b). When scholarship focuses on the communities we are a part of, there are additional considerations: Our emotional entanglements may not allow us to delimit fieldwork time, and distancing ourselves may not be easy, possible, or ethical (cf. Abrego *forthcoming*).

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, I did not plan to write about my experiences. And later, the idea of disclosing my private pain and vulnerability in a professional context felt exceptionally daunting; indeed, divulging too much about the intimate grief I witnessed thousands of people endure felt insensitive. Furthermore, as an academic, I knew that my scholarship would contribute, indirectly, to my financial earnings through its inclusion in my tenure and promotion portfolio. Although I depend on my mariachi income to make up for a lack of generational wealth and to support my family, I felt uncomfortable about profiting from everyone’s grief beyond the hours I was paid to accompany them in their time of need. Still, I felt a social responsibility to document and explain the unique situation I saw unfolding before me. Indeed, several mariachi, Chicana, and Latinx community stakeholders, as well as academic colleagues, encouraged me to embrace my roles as a mariachi and a scholar to advocate for our shared concerns about the sustainability of mariachi music in Los Angeles and the well-being of our community.

3. Among scholarly works on music and the Americas, there is no one universally accepted identifying term. All current umbrella terms and their definitions for Latino/a/x/e and Hispanic are problematic and contested; they are worthy of their own extensive study and debate. In this article, I will generally use the gender-inclusive, nonbinary term Latinx (pronounced “Latin-ex”). My use of this term draws on the context of the United States and the way that government data at various levels is organized. Federal, state, and local governments in the United States use “Latino” and “Hispanic” as interchangeable identifiers representing people with heritage from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America living *within* the United States. It is also important to note that according to the US 2019 census estimate, 76 percent of the estimated 4.8 million residents who identified as Latino or Hispanic (any race) in Los Angeles County identified as Mexican. Latinx people are the majority population in 47 out of 88 cities in Los Angeles County.

My work contributes to the growing body of ethnomusicological literature examining social upheaval, grief, pain, and community responses related to natural disasters (e.g., Macy 2010; Dirksen 2012; Stuparitz 2023) and health crises (e.g., Harrison 2013; Lipsitz and ACTA 2020). The literature about music and COVID-19 has been rapidly expanding, and research projects documenting the pandemic's impact in the United States include mariachi musician Mary Alfaro's work with UCLA's Center for Oral History Research; interviews with musicians from across the country conducted by Hobbs et al. (2020); a playlist and overview of issues faced by Asian American and Pacific Islanders (Kim et al. 2021); and studies on the psychological well-being of classical musicians (e.g., Wang et al. 2022).

As Latinx representation has increased in higher education and in fields related to ethnomusicology, mariachi scholarship by practitioners has also expanded during the last two decades. Common frameworks for mariachi research, especially when examined within the United States, have covered the style's history (Salazar 2011), transmission (Rodríguez 2006), performance practices (Estrada 2022), and issues that attend mariachi musicians' gender and sexuality (Fogelquist 2017; Soveranes 2017; Torres-Ramos 2020).⁴ My article's primary focus is not meant to contribute directly to these frameworks. Instead, I explore a new area of mariachi scholarship by linking a localised musical practice with a global public health emergency, shedding light on the lived significance of housing inequities and mortality rates that drove mariachi funeral performances during the pandemic.

AN OVERVIEW OF LATINX RISK FACTORS, VULNERABILITIES, AND INEQUITIES

In the United States, non-White communities have generally experienced significant negative effects from the COVID-19 pandemic because communities of colour face structural inequities that put them at a greater risk. By 1 December 2022, Latinxs in Los Angeles County accounted for approximately 43 percent (or 1.45 million) of the county's cumulative COVID-19 cases, nearly quadruple the rate experienced by other social groups, resulting in at least 16,242 COVID-19 deaths. Furthermore, the mortality rate for Latinxs in Los Angeles County increased 48 percent *for all reasons* through spring 2022—more than double that of most racialised groups—even as mortality rates decreased overall (County of Los Angeles 2022; Campa et al. 2022). According to one health dashboard provided by the US Center for Disease Control (CDC), the number of deaths for Hispanic/Latinx Americans in the United States was an alarming 134.7 percent higher in January 2021 than from 2015 to 2019 (National Center for Health Statistics 2023).⁵ Reasons for these grim statistics for the Latinx

4. For more on mariachi history and resources focused on Mexico, I recommend beginning with the references cited in Salazar (2011). See also Lozano (2020) for more on Mexican immigrant survivor songs or ghost *corridos* about death, dying, or near-death border experiences.

5. The difference in all expected national deaths during January 2021 compared to 2015–2019 was 31.7 percent for non-Hispanic White, 54.8 percent for non-Hispanic Black, 109 percent for non-Hispanic Asian, 99.2 percent for non-Hispanic Native American and Alaskan, and 44.5 percent for those in the other category (National Center for Health Statistics 2023).

population in the United States include their occupations, higher ambient pollution of their urban environment, overcrowding in their homes, and their displacement due to gentrification. Each of these factors greatly increased Latinx people's risk of being exposed to COVID-19 at work or within their household.

In general, people of colour are more likely to work in positions that offer lower salaries and provide less access to health care and personal protective equipment (PPE).⁶ From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Latinxs have occupied a majority of jobs in California deemed "essential": According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Latinxs in California State "make up 93% of farmworkers; 78% of construction workers; 69% of cooks; 60% of laborers and material movers; 57% of truck drivers; 55% of cashiers; and 52% of janitors and building cleaners" (Lin and Money 2021). Workers in essential roles were required to continue working throughout the early stages of the pandemic, when vaccines were not yet available and adequate PPE was not provided, increasing their risk of exposure.⁷ For example, Farmer John, a meat-packing plant in Vernon, adjacent to the Boyle Heights neighbourhood and known for its contribution to air pollution in the area, was plagued with multiple COVID-19 outbreaks among its majority Latinx employees due to poor management of work conditions (Douglas and Gee 2021).⁸

Due to the historical consequences of redlining—a discriminatory segregation practice in the United States—many Latinxs and communities of colour tend to live in more polluted neighbourhoods.⁹ Air pollution and PM_{2.5} fine particulates emitted by cars (e.g., microplastics from tires, fuel combustion) are known to significantly increase risk for an array of underlying health conditions and COVID-19 comorbidities, such as general inflammation, respiratory and cardiovascular problems, and Type 2 diabetes (e.g., English et al. 2022; GBD 2022; Meo et al. 2015). Several mariachis I knew personally passed away during the pandemic due to underlying health conditions, such as high blood pressure and diabetes; others now manage long-COVID disabilities, including an inability to sing after being intubated or surviving a stroke.

In addition to increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to their occupations, Latinxs were also at higher risk of catching COVID-19 at home. Throughout 2020, two census workers were able to provide me with anecdotal evidence about trends they observed in Latinx communities after visiting homes door to door in Los Angeles

6. Close to 700,000 (or 14 percent) of Latinxs in the county do not have health insurance. For more on health insurance statuses, see Becker et al. (2019).

7. For more information on how Black, Native American, Native Hawai'ian, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian (especially Filipinx) communities in Los Angeles have been severely impacted by the pandemic, see Ceron (2022) and Kwan et al. (2022).

8. Farmer John announced plans to shut down this factory in February 2023 after operating in Los Angeles for 90 years. The company plans to move operations to the Midwest.

9. Redlining is a practice in the United States that began in the 1930s. It was used to systematically segregate people and deny them services (e.g., mortgage loans) based on their race, ethnicity, nationality, or income. Following the passing of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, many neighbourhoods of colour created through redlining were physically segregated through highway building projects.

County. They noted primarily that Latinx homes often had double to triple the expected occupancy. Although I heard rumours of mariachis potentially having caught COVID-19 at a performance, many mariachi musicians I know who tested positive for the virus (including myself) likely caught it from someone they lived with or at an indoor, nonmariachi event.

Since the 1990s, the Los Angeles area has experienced waves of middle-class gentrification that have displaced working-class residents and exacerbated overcrowding due to inflated rents.¹⁰ In 2020, crammed living quarters made it impossible for many Latinxs to isolate themselves from each other. Recent reports also indicate that homelessness among Latinxs in Los Angeles and across California increased as much as 26 percent in the Los Angeles area since 2020, rising faster than other social groups (Tobias 2022; Mejia and Vives 2022). Ongoing problems resulting from gentrification, combined with the strains of the pandemic, created a tipping point, prompting some mariachis to leave Boyle Heights and nearby cities out of financial necessity.¹¹ Following 2020, more mariachis have also lived in their vehicles near Mariachi Plaza (in Boyle Heights) to be near their prospective work, either as a short-term or long-term solution. One plaza musician currently rents out the multiple vehicles he owns to other mariachis who need a place to stay.¹²

BOYLE HEIGHTS AND LOS ANGELES' MARIACHI PLAZA: A BACKGROUND

Boyle Heights, a neighbourhood lying just east of downtown Los Angeles city and nestled in between multiple highways, is perhaps best-known today for its Latinx community and its Mariachi Plaza. Originally the site of the Indigenous Tongva settlement known as Apachianga (or Apachia), the neighbourhood has been a multiethnic and multiracial community for generations.¹³ Over the last few centuries, residents have been subjected to violent removals, and in the case of Mexicans and Native Americans, they have been subjected to physical violence, deportation, and murder, all encouraged by policies like the

10. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some scholars have observed that gentrification in places like Los Angeles has slowed due to more people leaving gentrifying neighbourhoods than migrating into them (see Ding and Hwang 2022), whereas some experts' projections indicate there's a likelihood of more troubling, harsher waves of gentrification that will come following the end of eviction moratoriums (see Lung-Amam 2021). In California, laws such as the Ellis Act of 1985 and the Costa-Hawkins Act of 1995 further worsen gentrification because they block increasing affordable housing and allow for rents to be hiked. For more on waves of gentrification, see Aalbers (2019).

11. See also Harrison's discussion on gentrification, aestheticisation of the poor in the arts, and displacement (2020a).

12. Southern California's warm climate makes it possible to sleep in cars overnight without risk of freezing.

13. There have been historical enclaves of Black, Jewish, Russian, Syrian, Armenian, Italian, Filipinx, and Japanese residents peacefully coexisting in the Boyle Heights area, which is named after Andrew Boyle, an Irish immigrant who purchased the land from the López family in 1859.

Anti-Vagrancy Act of 1855 and the violent rhetoric related to immigration in the United States that continues today.¹⁴

Many of the struggles that have been documented among residents of this neighbourhood are examples of what Latinx communities deal with across the region, such as the impacts of pollution (especially PM_{2.5} fine particles), poor health, and housing scarcity caused by public policies. Residents also exemplify how Latinxs maintain community bonds, mutual support, and lead fights for social justice. For mariachi musicians, Boyle Heights has served as a central and historically significant place.

Mariachi musicians have been a part of Los Angeles' musical culture since at least the early 1900s, when Charles Lummis recorded *sones* such as "La Zorrita" ("The Little Fox") performed in the area in 1904 (Salazar 2011).¹⁵ Oral histories about Boyle Heights indicate that mariachi musicians have been gathering at "La Boyle" (as it is affectionately referred to in Spanish) since the 1930s. By the 1940s, the small triangular strip of land has been considered Los Angeles' official mariachi plaza, predating Metro's 2009 opening of a controversial transit stop and community stage that replaced the doughnut shop parking lot where mariachis had long gathered (Kurland and Lamadrid 2013).

Mariachis still meet near First Street and Boyle Avenue, and many have depended on living in affordable housing near the plaza that provides easy access to mariachi-related businesses (e.g., La Casa del Mariachi), and the ability to live car-free or carpool with bandmates (as a choice or by necessity). Over the last two decades, however, changes like Metro's eastern extension of the E Line (formerly the Gold Line) have regrettably harmed community members who would otherwise benefit from mass transit projects. In particular, the new developments supported by Metro have intensified gentrification in the area, especially because new housing is not accessible to most residents due to housing laws. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mariachis were often in the news due to legal battles with landlords who raised rents by 80 percent (or \$800) in a single month or attempted to evict families to sell properties to investors (McGahan 2017; Wick 2017).

Mariachi Plaza and Boyle Heights are not only significant for mariachi music due to the historical presence of musicians; the businesses that serve mariachis, as well as other regional Mexican style musicians and dancers, also help maintain the economic ecosystem of the area. Additionally, employees of the music businesses and the musicians who visit

14. Also known as the Greaser Act, which refers to the racial slur for those of mixed Spanish and Indigenous heritage. Similar xenophobic laws were also passed during this time targeting Asian Americans, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act. Throughout late 1800s and early 1900s, Mexican, Asian, and Native Californian residents were subjected to physical intimidation, lynching, and deportations. For additional historical information about ethnic and racial enclaves of Boyle Heights, see Elliott (1996), Kurland and Lamadrid (2013), and Macías (2012).

15. Although the music is listed as "Spanish salon music," it differs from the typical 3/4 waltz patterns common in *Californiano* music that Lummis recorded. Salazar's research argues that this is a Mexican *son*, with the characteristic hemiola pattern of a *son jalisciense*. *Son jaliscienses* are what mariachis primarily played in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

their shops support the nearby small businesses, such as Mexican and Central American restaurants. La Boyle has been an important centre for musicians living throughout the region and even across the United States and Mexico. While some of us visit the area for the occasional errand, such as picking up guitarrón strings or a *tali* (guitar strap), people from out of town also order instruments, supplies, and uniforms from Boyle Heights-based small businesses, such as Guadalupe Custom Strings and Candelas Guitars. Musicians from Mexico and across Latin America also frequently visit the area to network with local musicians. Concerns about gentrification and displacement are frequently brought up in small talk when visiting shops like La Casa del Mariachi, where shop owner and tailor Jorge Tello and family members have often greeted me by saying they are thankful to be running their shop one more day. Although haunting worries about gentrifying developments persist, as of 2023, the plaza remains an important gathering space for mariachis despite the pandemic's disruptions.

MARIACHI PLAZA, PERFORMANCE STYLES, AND CAJÓN (ORAL TRADITION)

Within the style of mariachi music, there are two general substyles. One is the modern, "show" style based on notated arrangements for typically larger groups (usually ten to sixteen members); performances of these arrangements often feature virtuosity and polished showmanship. Contrary to popular understanding, much of the mariachi music heard on commercial recordings has been created by composers and arrangers in the music and film industries, and therefore, a large portion of this repertoire is not in the public domain.

The second type is the *chamba* (gig) or traditional style, which is based on the *cajón* (oral tradition) arrangements of mariachi songs. Although the repertoire draws from commercial recordings of mariachi music and contemporary hits, *cajón* versions are often rearranged to suit a smaller ensemble (usually five to six players). These arrangements are typically learned by ear, and players often need to switch between parts to balance harmonies between the singers and melodic instruments. Players are expected to learn quickly by ear, effortlessly transpose keys of songs, have a deep knowledge of repertoire, play multiple instruments, improvise, and memorise several hours' worth of music. In this traditional style, mariachi musicians frequently perform religious music for special occasions, such as Catholic masses for the Virgen de Guadalupe and for people's birthdays, baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Mariachi plazas are critical spaces for facilitating the teaching of *cajón* arrangements over generations while also providing social support networks that allow mariachis to dedicate themselves full-time to the music. Out of the various mariachi plazas in the world, Los Angeles' plaza is among the most highly regarded because it is closely connected to the city's famous music industry and live music scene.¹⁶ Essentially, LA's

16. Mariachi plazas are common throughout Latin American cities, such as Mexico City's Plaza Garibaldi or Bogotá, Colombia's mariachi plaza in the La Playa neighbourhood. These plazas tend to be in open air, urban spaces, and they are places where mariachis may network, socialised, or book performances.

Mariachi Plaza serves as an important transmission context for mariachi music, and many mariachi “place-makers” (Molina 2015) who have lived or worked in Boyle Heights constitute an important archive of mariachi music’s intangible cultural heritage.¹⁷ Lifelong Boyle Heights resident Michelle Salinas wrote to me describing her perception of mariachis and the spaces they occupy:

I grew up in the apartments on 1815 East 2nd Street, ones that housed many mariachis... since before there was a kiosk or a Metro [stop]. I’d always hear them practicing, singing, violins, guitars, trumpets [in the building and outside in the open plaza area]. Self-educated folks, folks that are from generations of musicians. This is their craft. They laid a huge foundation in Boyle Heights. Mariachi Plaza is what it is because of them. Many businesses along 1st St. and Boyle have flourished by catering to these mariachis. This isn’t just some hobby. It’s how people are making a living and a community. (personal communication, January 2018)

The sustainability of mariachi music *as an oral tradition* is tied to the plaza, to musicians’ and their families’ well-being, and to the security of being able to live nearby and support the economic ecosystem of unique small businesses.¹⁸

THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND INITIAL SHUTDOWNS

From mid-March through April 2020, most mariachis had all their contracts cancelled. Many of us chose not to perform as a safety precaution during the first two weeks of shutdowns. Due to the uncertainties of how the pandemic might develop, many mariachis looked to jobs that they hoped would give them health benefits, access to testing at a time when COVID tests were scarce, and essential-worker status that, they hoped, would make them eligible to be first in line to receive the vaccine once it was released.¹⁹ Many of my mariachi students and colleagues who took other jobs, however, applied for positions with Amazon warehouses or delivery services because they offered flexible schedules, health benefits, and weekly COVID-19 testing.

The need to keep working and the forced reliance on major corporations like Amazon that paid near-minimum wages have come at a cost. Guitarist and college student Mey Belman was scheduled for night shifts while she continued taking her university classes online. She explained to me that “[Amazon] was the job where I got hired very quick when the pandemic started. It has affected my whole life; school also has become

17. Mariachi music was inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2011. For more information on ethnic place makers, their legacies in urban communities, and gentrification, see Molina (2015).

18. For more on how musical communities, creative economies, and economic environments are affected by gentrification and public policies, see Levine (2018).

19. The United States does not provide universal health care to its citizens. Most people living in the United States rely on their place of employment to allow them access to group health insurance programmes and networks. State and federal Medicaid programmes, known as Medi-Cal in California, are available to low-income individuals, but these programmes are not always accepted by physicians.

harder because I can't take as many classes as I wish and I'm tired all the time" (personal communication, 13 November 2021). Saulo Garcia, another former student of mine who performs with Mariachi Arcoiris, explained to me: "I had my day job, where I worked hard, did unappreciated work, and didn't get paid nearly the amount that I did for [mariachi] gigs. I learned that my time and skills are valuable and that I don't belong in the warehouses. I belong where my work is appreciated" (personal communication, 14 November 2021).

Feelings of being underappreciated have forced many younger players to refocus on their musical career goals and life plans, as my former student and freelance *guitarrón* (mariachi bass guitar) player Nate Salvatierra pointed out: "What I found was that I was worth way more than minimum wage. I've been taking my music career so much more seriously now because of the pandemic. I know my worth because the pandemic taught me that these companies see me as expendable" (personal communication, 13 November 2021). Some of my former bandmates are still working for delivery companies like Amazon. Others have had to find affordable housing arrangements in other cities like Bakersfield and Victorville (see Figure 1). The attrition of players who were once steady members of groups centred in La Boyle has created a shortage of mariachi musicians for busy times like summer weekends, and it has removed both older and younger generation players from the community.

JUMPING INTO ACTION AND FACILITATING CONNECTIONS

Although scores of news articles and stories throughout 2020 and 2021 focused on the cancelled work and silencing of mariachis during the initial shutdowns, there were many of us who jumped into action beginning in late April 2020 due to necessity. Many of my mariachi colleagues could not afford to stay home. People reinvented the mariachi business model to include virtual serenades or outdoor, socially distanced²⁰ curbside performances. Rodrigo Rodríguez, a friend of mine and a *caimán* (mariachi group owner) who often hires me, reflected on the changes and precautions taken at the beginning of the pandemic:

As mariachis, we were playing outside the houses and fences, and people indoors would open the window and listen. No contact. All payments were sent electronically in my experience. The musicians, we didn't shake hands or hug each other either, everyone travelled in their own car to avoid spreading the virus. I think it worked for us because none of us who gig together got sick. I had many mariachi friends who got sick because they were carpooling—old timers—and many of them died. We did what we had to do. We needed to work. (personal communication, 13 November 2021)

20. During the pandemic, "social distancing" was a euphemism for physical distancing.

At times many of us felt conflicted about performing despite the bans on large gatherings. A couple of times neighbours called the police on party hosts, although the responding officers were not stern and merely reminded us to keep a safe distance from each other. Even though we performed during riskier times when COVID-19 case counts were high, clients and bandmates have routinely taken precautions. Hand sanitiser has been and continues to be available at most parties, especially when food is served. Non-trumpet-playing colleagues may keep their masks on throughout a performance, while others may remove them to sing or when performing outdoors. Occasionally clients might insist we take our masks off, but the majority respect our space and personal choice to wear PPE.

I began receiving calls for gigs in April 2020 from people such as Rodrigo Rodríguez, and I chose to accept them because I relied on the supplemental income. Although I was nervous about exposure to the virus, I knew that I had access to healthcare (due to my job at the university) and my personal risk factors were generally low; also, I was not living with anyone who was immunocompromised. It was important to support friends who depended on performing mariachi full time, and I could support them best by being a reliable group member.

I continued to see an increased demand for mariachis from mid-May 2020 to late fall 2022, when work finally slowed down. As Jesse Flores, a former student of mine who runs his own group in Coachella, California, and often performs in Los Angeles, told me: “May of 2020 was a big boom for us because everyone was celebrating Mother’s Day. It hasn’t stopped from there, there is a lot more work now than before the pandemic” (personal communication, 14 November 2021). Based on my observations, the initial spike in demand for mariachi performances was largely tied to people attempting to stay positive. It felt like all the gigs were surprise events. We frequently performed for elderly grandparents who watched from windows in the safety of their homes while families joined them on the phone or stayed on the sidewalk. Mini-parades outside of people’s homes were common. Some family members would set up an elaborate birthday brunch spread on lawns or driveways, including a table to leave gifts in a no-contact fashion. We even surprised a few couples with sidewalk wedding receptions that their families organised on the days of their cancelled nuptials. Within the mariachi community, friends who could not travel to visit each other connected virtually by participating in social media trends, such as the TikTok Pass the Brush Makeup challenge or the dozens of coronavirus-inspired *cumbia* and *corrido* compositions featuring lyrics based on health precautions. My memories of 2020 performances are mostly pleasant because we were part of an effort to connect people with their loved ones; moved by kind gestures, tears were shed out of joy. By the end of 2020, I had performed about as much as in a typical prepandemic year: close to seventy performances.

The first several months of the pandemic were also characterised by volunteering our time at community events or lending a hand (or a few dollars) to people in need. For example, a group I perform with, Mariachi Lindas Mexicanas led by



Figure 3. Mariachi Lindas Mexicanas performs on stage for Linda Perry's Rock 'N' Relief benefit for CORE, 5 March 2021.

Maricela Martinez, opened a benefit concert at Dodger Stadium near the county's massive COVID-19 testing site; donations supported CORE's campaign for improving COVID testing and vaccine development (see Figure 3).²¹ Members of Lindas Mexicanas also donated some of our earnings to assemble boxes of essential household items, such as toilet paper, toothpaste, eggs, cooking oil, and blankets, which we distributed in Mariachi Plaza and delivered directly to the homes of vulnerable mariachis and their families (see Figure 4).

Collaborations between musicians and organisations like OMICAL (Organización de Mariachis Independientes de California), LiderArte, ELACC (East LA Community Corporation), and CPC (Community Power Collective) were common throughout the pandemic as community members aimed to provide their neighbours with basic services and supplies. These events were important because people in the Latinx community often associate government assistance with social stigma and are reluctant to sign up for programmes like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)²²; therefore, when neighbours, fellow musicians, or known community nonprofit organisations help to distribute these resources, they can have a greater impact.

21. CORE or Community Organized Relief Effort was founded by Sean Penn.

22. This is a federal programme that requires participants to meet criteria based on income, resources, immigration status, housing, and employment to qualify for assistance for specific types of food purchases. The programme is more commonly known as "food stamps."



Figure 4. Members of Mariachi Lindas Mexicanas pose in front of the Mariachi Plaza kiosk after distributing care packages in Boyle Heights, 5 January 2021.

AT THE CENTRE OF THE PANDEMIC

Los Angeles County became the epicentre of the pandemic in the United States during late December 2020 and the fallout lasted well into spring 2021. According to the County's Public Health Department, new daily cases reached a record high of 20,414 on 1 January 2021; soon after, 8 January 2021 set a record for the highest number of COVID-19 deaths at 318 per day.²³ It can be assumed that the actual numbers are higher than reported due to the complications of testing availability and the medical system being overwhelmed.

It is difficult to personalise the staggering numbers or to comprehend the immensity of suffering represented by statistics charted on infographics or printed on a page. While many people have spent time during the pandemic anxiously reading the latest case numbers and COVID-19 test positivity rates before “doomscrolling” to the next headline, my mariachi colleagues and I have had an intimate window into the immense collective suffering encapsulated in the dry statistics. As mariachis, we have experienced these numbers through repeated visits to busy cemeteries, and as the sounds of sniffles and sobs between eulogies. We have felt them as we choke on the lyrics of a song while singing to our bandmates' loved ones or to our own family members. Similar to those in the

23. One year later and following vaccine availability, new high records were set: 60,778 daily cases on 4 January 2022, and 98 daily deaths on 23 January 2022. It is important to note that national averages indicate that Native American and Black/African American communities have been most disproportionately impacted nationwide.

medical and death care professions, we have accompanied numerous deceased people to their graves and consoled their loved ones. However, unlike these other professions, we have also witnessed the processing of grief through additional performances for the families of those who have passed; we played at receptions immediately after a funeral, performed on the anniversaries of loved ones' deaths, and accompanied other events for family members of the deceased. One of the most meaningful, yet difficult, events I played at was for the mother of Maricela Martinez's family friend. She was terminally ill and isolated on account of COVID-19, so her family decided to celebrate her life before she passed away, hosting a bittersweet family reunion and cookout in their apartment complex's parking lot.

An official count of mariachis who died due to the virus or virus-related complications does not exist, but nearly all of us have known multiple people who passed away during the pandemic. We have lost bandmates, friends, mentors, and acquaintances. Many of us have performed at funerals for fellow mariachis, their family members, our own family members, friends of friends' family members, and even longtime clients who felt like extended relatives. Mariachi Plaza-based musicians Sally Hawkrigde and Aurelio Reyes from Mariachi Trio Palenque reported to me that in just the first three months of 2021, they performed at nine funerals, which is approximately equivalent to the annual total number of funerals they booked in 2019. They played for twenty-one funerals by the end of the year (personal communication, 4 January 2022). Mariachi Trio Palenque also performed for families attempting to lift someone's spirits while they battled the viral disease (Kopetman and Bersebach 2021). January through April are typically the slowest months for mariachis, but during these months in 2021, I performed at seventy events and close to twenty funerals or death anniversaries, which equalled my prepandemic annual averages (see Figure 5). By the end of 2021, I performed at approximately 240 events, nearly quadruple the performances in prepandemic years.

Some of the families who hired us in spring 2021 waited up to three months to have a funeral. Mortuaries and crematories were delayed for months, and I witnessed during this time how cemeteries like Rose Hills, which at 1,400 acres claims to be the largest cemetery in North America, opened several new sections. One of my mariachi colleagues who prepurchased a burial space at Rose Hills told me that the cemetery expects to reach its capacity in 2030, a full decade sooner than prepandemic projections. Other cemeteries were rumoured to have been full by the time we performed services. Some families ultimately chose to hold funerals in their backyards, where open caskets could be visited by family members with less delay.

Each time I played at a cemetery, there were usually several other music groups performing, mostly mariachis and other Mexican regional *norteño* and *banda* groups. One day, Rose Hills was so crowded that as we walked to our scheduled performance, we had a trail of people requesting us to play at least one or two songs for their families who were gathered that day but could not hire a group. We performed for several families as we made our way to our booked event. Some mariachi groups spent entire days at cemeteries; they arrived with one or two prearranged performances and spent the rest of the day playing for



Figure 5. Shadows of Mariachi Lindas Mexicanas members stretch over the grass at a funeral in Resurrection Catholic Cemetery in Rosemead, CA, 15 February 2021.

families who struggled to afford or find an available mariachi. The collective grief and desperation we observed was immense. The congested cemeteries had a strikingly frenetic energy; the grounds were blanketed with flowers, photographs, service tents, and chequered mounds of new graves; between them flowed a steady procession of mourners, musicians, cars, broadcast news vans, and grave-digging machines.

The spring of 2021 was a difficult time when I frequently sobbed in my car between funerals.²⁴ Even though it has been difficult to witness so much grief, common sentiments among mariachis reflect on gratitude and finding solace while supporting other people's grief during unsettling times. Jesse also reported performing at two or three funerals during spring 2021: "I saw that even though you have the world hurting, you could make music to cheer people up and bring us together. I have a passion for music

24. Mariachi funeral performances tend to occur during weekday mornings between Monday through Thursday, overlapping with when I needed to attend faculty meetings over Zoom. Most academics I know felt justifiably anxious about canceled concert hall performances and the pandemic in general; however, it was jarring to attend these meetings while in my car, with my screen off and sound muted as I sobbed in between funerals. The feeling of being an out-of-place scholar (Abrego *forthcoming*) weighed heavily on me as I observed the stark contrasts in our perceptions of the pandemic, even though we all lived and worked in the same geographical region.

more than ever” (personal communication, 14 November 2021). Saulo’s sentiments echo mine and Jesse’s:

I learned how essential my job [as a musician] is. Initially after returning to gigging, many were funerals. Many people were grieving from losses, and we were providing a service, helping them cope. And it’s tough, because we were losing people in the mariachi community, too, many trumpet players were lost. Our people were grieving and struggling to help others. (personal communication, 14 November 2021)

Sally also reflected on her experience, sharing that “[witnessing this grief] helped me process my brother’s death and my parents’ [death] from 2015” (personal communication, 17 October 2022). She mentioned that she appreciated having the opportunity to help people, even in small ways, rather than feeling anxious about the pandemic at home.

HONOURING LOVED ONES AND SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

A strong mutual support network between close friends and extended family in Latinx communities is what scholars refer to as *familia* (family) or *familismo* (familism), contributing to a phenomenon dubbed “the Latino/x Paradox” by health officials (Campa et al. 2022).²⁵ As Sergio Alonso, a San Fernando–based mariachi educator and harpist with Mariachi Los Camperos, explains, mariachis relied on this type of interdependence during the pandemic, and we engaged in projects and memorial concerts that prioritised connecting with community members and supporting everyone’s well-being (2022).²⁶

At the time of writing this article, we passed the third year of the pandemic and there were significantly fewer daily deaths and funerals. In retrospect, I have noticed how some families’ habits surrounding grief and death have gradually shifted. For example, dedicated spaces for deceased relatives are now more common at events like weddings or birthday parties; there, family photographs are displayed to represent those attending in spirit, usually at a table near the entrance, beside the gifts, or close to the seating list. And although special requests are expected of mariachis on any occasion, it seems—now more than ever—that people dedicate songs like “Hermoso Cariño” (“My Beautiful Sweetheart”) to lost loved ones, clinging to their memories and rehumanising them as they sing along.²⁷ Joyful events often have mournful moments, accompanied by an air of survivor’s guilt.

25. The Hispanic or Latino Paradox is a health trend showing that Latinxs in the United States tend to live several years longer than White Americans, despite significant disadvantages due to lower income, less access to health care, and higher rates of preexisting conditions, such as diabetes. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is believed to have upended the Latinx Paradox (Garcia and Sáenz 2022).

26. Although beyond the scope of this article, mariachis have also been quick to give back to their communities during traumatic events, such as for entertainment for migrant children housed at temporary shelters and for memorials of the Uvalde, Texas, school shooting victims (e.g., Medrano 2022).

27. For more on the rehumanising of people through songs, musicians as extended family or caregivers, filial pseudo-laments, choreographing grief, and sonic generosity, see Denise Gill’s poignant contribution to the 2016 SEM President’s Roundtable (Rasmussen et al. 2019).

One poignant performance when this was made clear to me occurred on 9 July 2022. My weekend of mariachi gigs began with a surprise serenade for a couple's ninth wedding anniversary in Long Beach, California. We entered the backyard playing one of the most requested mariachi songs, "Hermoso Cariño," while the husband brought roses to his wife and joined their small gathering of friends and family. The party lasted two hours and was a typical serenade. We played love songs dedicated to the couple in addition to cumbias and polkas that people requested for dancing. Friends and family laughed, a small child locked eyes on us and swayed to the music in her parents' arms. The hosts offered us *pan dulce* (Mexican sweet breads), tamales, and *café de olla* (spiced coffee). One of their final requests was legendary singer-songwriter Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno" ("Eternal Love"), which begins with the lyrics,

You are the sadness of my eyes that cry in silence for your love I look at myself in the mirror and I see on my face the time I have suffered since your goodbye.²⁸

Songs like "Amor Eterno," which Gabriel wrote for his mother after she passed away, are heartbreaking but frequent requests at celebrations, sometimes because people assume they are romantic songs. At a party, they can be tricky to perform because they shift the mood, and to be honest, I assumed the husband wanted to dedicate this song to his wife, which often happens. I began singing the refrain:

Oh! How I would like for you to be alive, that your eyes would have never closed, and I would be looking into them. Eternal love, unforgettable love, sooner or later I'll be with you in order to continue loving you.²⁹

I looked out at the small gathering and something struck me: Everyone was crying or holding back tears. Before the pandemic, when I sang "Amor Eterno" at a party, I would often observe one or two people tearing up, or I'd see a group of people happily singing along and swaying to one of Juan Gabriel's biggest hits; however, this time, grief was overflowing from *everyone*.

Among fellow mariachi musicians, we have leaned on each other during funeral performances, and on several occasions, we donated our time to perform for one of our family members' funerals. On 7 July 2022, I performed with Lindas Mexicanas at the funeral of our director's aunt. Tears were difficult to hold back as we sang songs from the Catholic mass and popular songs about loss, love, and grief. There were several moments when one of us had to step back mid-phrase to regain composure while someone sang in our place. One evening during a wake, I saw family members joining using video calls. It

28. My translation: "*Tú eres la tristeza de mis ojos que lloran en silencio por tu amor, me miro en el espejo y veo en mi rostro el tiempo que he sufrido por tu adiós.*"

29. My translation: "*Como quisiera, ¡ay!, que tú vivieras, que tus ojitos, jamás se hubieran, cerrado nunca y estar mirándonos. Amor eterno, e inolvidable, tarde o temprano estaré contigo para seguir amándonos.*"

was exceptionally difficult to witness because it reminded me of family funerals I could only attend through streaming or video calls. Feelings of disbelief, desperation, and intense loneliness as a result of grieving from afar washed over me; I began sobbing and had to step behind my bandmates to calm down. Singing these songs and participating in these services has been cathartic for mariachis like me as we process our own grief.

CONCLUSION

Due to the systemic marginalisation of Latinx communities, of which mariachis are an integral part, we mariachis both witnessed and suffered the disproportionate effects of COVID-19; this included a period when Los Angeles was the national epicentre of the pandemic. Despite popular narratives of musicians being silenced during lockdowns, mariachi musicians responded in chorus by supporting their community during a time of extreme grief while processing our own losses. Mariachis also adapted performance practices to include personal protective equipment and social distancing, typically outdoors. We weathered the potential isolation of COVID-19 lockdowns not only through performances but also through community outreach.

How might ethnomusicologists best advocate for our communities and the musicians with whom we work, especially in times of crisis? Echoing Rebecca Dirksen's call for an ethics of care in ethnomusicology (2023, 213) and Klisala Harrison's call to ethnomusicologists to reflect on the values that guide their research (2020b, 79), I want to emphasise that my intention in sharing this *testimonio* is to help expose deep-rooted causes for the gross injustices and systemic violence experienced by Latinx communities in the United States. Sometimes our pursuit of justice is publishing. In other instances, it may be performing alongside members of our community or our research collaborators (or both). In other contexts, it may look like bringing toilet paper and eggs to an elder.

As Natalia Molina argues, “[W]e have a responsibility to the future as well as to the past,” and that includes writing about easily overlooked place-makers whose stories highlight the complexities of our societies (2015, 111). To elaborate on Kevin Levine's (2018) suggestion that ethnomusicologists further examine extramusical facets of musicians' lives, such as housing policies and tax regimes, I also suggest that ethnomusicologists continue to engage more with disciplines that directly affect people's well-being, such as urban design and healthcare.

Along with grief and sadness, I have also experienced anger as I observe the US government's failures in managing COVID-19 and the fallout of the pandemic. Decades of scholarship across the sciences and humanities have warned us about the underlying vulnerabilities and risks that have caused the disproportionate and unnecessary traumatic losses many marginalised communities have suffered due to lack of access to healthcare. For a musical style like traditional mariachi music, the stakes are high. Losing players of all ages due to displacement from housing, work, disability, or death over a short period has strained the mariachi community. What are the costs of losing the century-old Mariachi

Plaza in Boyle Heights? Knowledge and mastery of the oral tradition is negatively impacted with each loss of a veteran or potential musician from transmission networks.

Examining a public health crisis through an ethnomusicological lens allows us to further understand the breadth and profundity of human experience when faced with unfathomable circumstances that cannot be fully represented by large numbers or statistics. We can also learn more about the human condition and shifts in social practice that occur in response to the lived consequences of political policies and natural disasters. Grief and trauma are difficult to face, but in processing these experiences, we better appreciate the ways that music creates social bonds and advocates for our communal well-being.

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