

Gil Sperry brings mariachi to life

By **TIM KELLER**
The Chronicle-News

DES MOINES – Gil Sperry brought his infectious enthusiasm for mariachi music to western Union County over the weekend, giving well-received presentations at the Des Moines School Friday afternoon and the old Folsom Schoolhouse gym Saturday night.

Accompanied by his wife Priscilla, Sperry traveled from their home on the Baja Peninsula in Mexico to spend two days in the Folsom area, staying at Folsom Falls Ranch where Priscilla gained the unique experience of riding a long-horn bull.

Gil Sperry is a born teacher, the kind whose classes people flock to attend. He clearly loves people as much as he loves his subject matter. Using audio and video recordings to demonstrate his lessons, Sperry guided his audiences through history, musicology, and even etymology. It was more fun than that sounds.

He began by tracing the history of the words in the title of his book, *Mariachi for Gringos*. Making great use of audience participation, he dashed expectations when the audience learned that the word “gringo” derived hundreds of years ago from the Spanish “griego,” or Greek, referring to Casca’s line to Cassius in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “It was Greek to me.” Thus, “gringo,” or Greek, came to refer to anyone who speaks an unknown tongue.

The term “mariachi” was harder to trace, but Sperry’s best guess was that it came from the *Coca* Indian language in central Mexico five centuries ago and meant “a deer running fast.” Mariachi music traces its birth to the collaboration of the *Coca* Indians with the newly-arrived Franciscan monks accompanying the initial New World forays of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés.

What’s the most famous and popular mariachi song? *La Bamba*.

Sperry played a wide variety of sound recordings, asking the audience each time, “Is it mariachi?” Each time, Sperry demonstrated that it was. Zuben Mehta conducting the Los



Photo by Tim Keller

Gil Sperry traveled from his home in Baja, Mexico, to present a pair of programs on mariachi music to audiences in Des Moines and Folsom last weekend.

Angeles Philharmonic for a performance by the Three Tenors: Plácido Domingo sings a song that Sperry shows is mariachi. Richie Valens’ 1958 classic, *La Bamba*? It’s a 300-year-old mariachi song born in Veracruz.

Sperry showed a dance video made to accompany the 1987 release of Linda Ronstadt’s “*Canciones de Mi Padre*,” which sold more than a million copies and expanded mariachi’s reach. Ronstadt printed English translations next to all the song lyrics – though her mother is from Mexico, Ronstadt herself does not speak Spanish – another key to spreading the popu-

larity of the music. As Sperry pointed out, the biggest impediment to Americans enjoying mariachi is that they don’t understand the lyrics.

Sperry’s book follows Ronstadt’s lead in placing English translations alongside lyrics of famous mariachi songs. It provides the same level of fun that Sperry’s local presentations did over the weekend. How much should you tip when a mariachi comes to serenade you at your table? Read the book to find out.

In fact, it was just such an experience, in Puerto Vallarta in 1975, that first piqued Sperry’s interest in mariachi. A nine-member

mariachi band approached him and Priscilla, said something the Sperrys didn’t understand, then launched into song. The Sperrys were so transported that they urged the band on for 90 minutes...and \$150.

Friday afternoon, Sperry delivered his entertaining program at Des Moines School to an audience of 100 students, staff, and public, augmented by a busload of students from the Branson School across the state line. Saturday night’s program to three dozen people – mostly “gringos” – at the Folsom Schoolhouse, accompanied the Smithsonian Institute’s traveling exhibit, *New Harmonies*, which remains open daily from 10 to 5 through Saturday, when it moves on to Santa Rosa, NM.

Like the exhibit, Sperry’s presentations were sponsored by the Folsom

Museum, the New Mexico Humanities Council, and the Smithsonian.

Remaining events in the season include a public presentation at Des Moines School Thursday, Sept. 16 at 1 p.m., on *Music of the Dust Bowl*.

Sunday morning, Sept. 26, brings the 3rd Annual “*Run Around the Rim*” half marathon and 5-kilometer races at Capulin Volcano National Monument and Folsom, followed at 3 p.m. that afternoon by Sharon Niederman’s presentation, “*From Klezmer to Swing*,” showing Jewish cultural influences in northeastern New Mexico. It will also be the last day the Folsom Museum is open seven days a week until the 2011 season.

Questions may be directed to the museum at (575) 278-2122 or www.folsommuseum.org.

DUI, speeding led to marijuana arrest

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District Attorney’s office has not filed any charges formally as of press time.

Baca was pulled over in a 1995 Ford Windstar on the Kit Carson bypass at approximately 7:25 p.m. by Colorado State Trooper Jorge Leal.

The initial report released to the media did not say why Baca was pulled over initially, citing only a “traffic violation.”

During the stop (speeding), Leal noticed signs of possible narcotics trafficking.

A search of the vehicle found three pounds of marijuana and drug paraphernalia.

The passenger, Rose Baca, 49, Trinidad, also was arrested and booked but later released without any charges being filed against her.

Baca is scheduled to be in Las Animas County District Court at 9 a.m. on Oct. 7 to face formal charges.



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