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Celebrating Mexican Life in New York

By JULIE SALAMON

MexicoNow can be seen as a coming-out party for the huge influx of Mexicans into New York City over the last decade. In the six weeks since it opened on Oct. 23 dozens of events in 36 venues in the five boroughs have given New Yorkers a chance to discover the cutting edge of Mexican art, architecture and performance, as well as revisiting more familiar territory, like the films Luis Buñuel made during his exile in Mexico from the late 1940's to 1960.

Though not intended to be exclusive, this monthlong festival, which wraps up today, arrived with the blessing - and financing - of the establishment. Sponsors include the Mexican Tourism Board, American Express, the company Bloomberg and Mexicana Airlines. Performances, lectures and exhibitions have been held in Latino institutions like El Museo del Barrio and the Instituto Cervantes, but also in mainstream places like Lincoln Center, the Guggenheim Museum, the Joyce Theater and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. (The festival closes tonight with the popular musician Alejandro Fernández performing in the theater at Madison Square Garden.)

But it is a party that many Mexican newcomers to New York have not been able to attend. "For some people, particularly new immigrants, the experience of going to the theater or a performance is not possible," said Julian Zugazagoitia, the director of El Museo del Barrio, who was born and raised in Mexico. "They are working seven days a week, very heavy hours." (The Guggenheim's adult admission is \$15.)

According to the 2000 United States census, 186,872 Mexicans live in the city, more than triple the number a decade earlier; in addition at least 100,000 or more are undocumented immigrants. Many are doing jobs no one else wants, for pay few would accept. Many Mexicans in New York bear, in addition to the freight of economic pressure, the fear of deportation.

"I went to the exhibition at the Guggenheim and it was fantastic, but how can most Mexicans who live here afford to go to these things?" asked Teresa Garcia, development director for the Asociación Tepeyac de New York, founded in the mid-1990's by Roman Catholic priests and community leaders to help Mexican immigrants. Yet the festival's opening night offering on Oct. 23 - and the one most likely to appeal to a wide variety of Mexicans - was among the highest priced, and it sold out: the mariachi star Vicente Fernández and his band at Madison Square Garden.

If MexicoNow has demonstrated that Mexican culture includes but goes well beyond the clichés - ruins, tortillas, mariachi - the festival has also highlighted the challenges of defining cultural identity. Mexicans are the fastest-growing immigrant population in New York. But they say they often feel invisible in a city where the word Chicano is far more likely to evoke the streets of Los Angeles, or border towns in Texas, than Queens, Brooklyn or the Bronx.

"When you arrive here, you experience this incredibly odd and intriguing feeling of being in a city that knows us not at all, neither as Mexicans nor Chicanos," said Gerald P. Lopez, a law professor and director of the Center for Community Problem Solving at New York University, who grew up in East Los Angeles.

For much of New York's Mexican population, culture boils down to making an alien world feel like home. Music, dance and street festivals are often intertwined with religion, politics and the struggle for legal rights.

The single largest cultural event among Mexicans is the feast day celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe, this Sunday. The ritual is based on a legendary appearance, in 1531, by the Virgin Mary before an Aztec peasant, Juan Diego, a decade after the Spanish had conquered the Aztec empire. It was a significant cross-cultural moment, as the legend goes, because the Virgin

told Diego that she embraced not only the Spanish but native peoples as well.

Three years ago Tepeyac added a new variation on this theme by instituting the International Torch run, a relay race that began in Mexico City on Oct. 10 and that will culminate in New York at St. Patrick's Cathedral on Sunday. As the torch is passed, spectators greet the 7,000 runners with food, music and slogans about things like the rights of undocumented workers.

Both street culture and the more rarefied offerings of MexicoNow have similar goals, said Claudia Norman, project director of the festival. "Both want to make the invisible visible," said Ms. Norman, who moved to New York from Mexico City 15 years ago. "Both want to open a window onto this new group of citizens who might be your busboy or your lawyer. We are both."

The audiences for MexicoNow events have been mixed: Anglo, Mexican, a variety of tourists. When El Museo del Barrio presented "El Automovil Gris," a theater piece, the audience "looked like they might have walked from their apartments on Fifth Avenue, but also people from el barrio," Mr. Zugazagoitia said.

The Mexican community in New York barely existed 20 years ago. Researchers have just recently begun to develop information beyond the fact that a large percentage of Mexicans in New York come from the state of Puebla, southeast of Mexico City, and that they are poor. The unknowns include health care, housing, education, family dynamics and dealing with the criminal justice system and immigration issues. They are also learning how these immigrants create, celebrate and mourn.

Arnulfo Chino, 36, cultural development coordinator for Tepeyac, moved to New York 16 years ago from Puebla. "It was very difficult to find our music and, more important, our food," he said. "We had to drive all the way to New Rochelle to find tortillas and chilis for cooking."

In the last decade, however, fresh tortillas, chilis, even live chickens have become readily available in neighborhoods like Sunset Park and Bushwick in Brooklyn, in East Harlem and in neighborhoods like Elmhurst and Jackson Heights in Queens. Children can take mariachi lessons in East Harlem; nightclubs in Queens, Harlem and Brooklyn specialize in sonidero shows, a particular Mexican entertainment featuring celebrity disc jockeys.

Mr. Chino worked as a dishwasher at the Hudson River Club in the World Financial Center, across from the World Trade Center. He stayed there, in increasingly better positions, until Sept. 11, 2001. The restaurant closed.

"You have to look at how people have to adapt their culture to survive in the new environment, but also how they adapt the new environment to support their culture," said Ilana Harlow, a folklorist at the Library of Congress. "In New York, where all these cultures come into contact with each other, this mixing of cultures is more intense."

Consuelo Ríos Muñoz works at a music store in Sunset Park that features Spanish-language music, cumbia, bachatas, reggaeton and sonidero music. Ms. Ríos Muñoz, 19, has lived in New York for four years and speaks little English. She goes dancing at a club in Queens that plays reggaeton, a fusion of hip-hop and reggae from Puerto Rico, to a largely Mexican audience.

Ms. Ríos Muñoz said she planned to celebrate the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe in church on Dec. 12, but she has not sought traditional dances and songs she learned in Mexico. "I don't miss them," she said. "I'm into the reggaeton."