

Juanita Ulloa brings women into world of mariachi

JUANITA Ulloa describes her new album "Mujeres Y Mariachi" as mariachi-opera crossover. The latest work by this classically trained, Yale-educated and Panama-born artist introduces a female presence in the traditionally male music form of mariachi, which she grew up listening to in Mexico City. Ulloa, emphasizing that the term mariachi means Mexican orchestra, says the style of music most Americans associate with the matching black costumes and sombreros is most accurately called *ranchera*. Quick-witted and charming, Ulloa spoke with us from her home in Oakland.

Q: How long have you lived in the Bay Area?

A: I came here in 1979 to finish a master's degree in music at UC Berkeley, specifically in ethnomusicology. At the time I was studying north Indian music and playing the sitar.

Q: Playing the sitar?

A: I know — from the sitar to mariachi music! And before that, I was a classical pianist, playing Brahms. And I was an opera singer for eight years.

Q: The album is called "Mujeres y Mariachi," so obviously, it's about women in mariachi, but how did you become interested in that?

A: I had a line of children's CDs called "Canta Conmingo." I loved devoting my time to being a mom, but there was a part of me that was in-

If you go

▶ **Juanita Ulloa in a show for the family**

▶ **When:** 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Saturday

▶ **Where:** La Peña Cultural Center, 3105 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley

▶ **Cost:** \$4 for adults, \$3 for children

▶ **Call:** (510) 849-2568

▶ **Juanita Ulloa's CD release party**

▶ **When:** 8 p.m. Oct. 29

▶ **Where:** Freight & Salvage, 1111 Addison St., Berkeley

▶ **Cost:** \$15.50 in advance, \$16.50 at the door

▶ **Call:** (510) 548-1761

complete. Women were always contributing through their kids, but how did they express themselves? And how did I really want to express myself apart from my relationship to kids' music?

So I decided I would explore and research what women had contributed to Mexican music. I ended up at the

copyright office in D.C., looking up copyrights to listings of all the songs I could find written by women, and they were mostly by two women of the time, Maria Grever and Consuelo Velasquez. Maria Grever is the one who wrote "What a Difference a Day Makes." And Consuelo Velasquez had the hit "Bésame Mucho" in 1941. This research resulted in me doing a CD about women, a tribute to what women had done in Mexican music, "Mujeres." It's a CD of *boleros*, or ballads.

Q: Why mariachi?

A: The kind of music that Americans really associate with Mexico is mariachi music — *ranchera* music — because they recognize the sombreros and the spirited nature of the music. But what have women done there? I was in Mexico, and a producer that I was talking to about doing my mariachi CD told me I had overlooked a composer, Emma Elena Valdelamar. I interviewed her and we became very good friends. That's how I

found how forbidden it was for her to study music.

I told her about my research on (Grever and Velasquez), but they had come from very well-to-do families. One of them was a classical pianist and the other one, Maria Grever, lived during the Mexican Civil War, so she was raised part-time in France and part-time in New York. She was a very international person, so these women weren't raised in a normal Mexican situation. The normal, run-of-the mill woman is not getting a musical education at all. In fact, she's not being encouraged to think.

I realized I should take a stand, and let women see that there are women who can do this, and do a good job at it and sound beautiful and make a contribution that is uniquely female, that will add another dimension to the music — the sound of the female voice.

Q: A lot of the songs on "Mujeres Y Mariachi" sound almost sensual. Do you think that vibe has always existed in *ranchera*

music or has adding a feminine perspective brought that side out?

A: I think there's a sensuality of Latin music and it's expression that can't be denied. I pray and hope people feel it even when they can't understand the words.

The place where I draw the line personally is women needing to sell their music based on the way they look.

At the Latin Grammys, for example, they went too far. The only woman who didn't take some of her clothes off was (Cuban salsa legend) Celia Cruz, and of course, she's not going to disrobe because she's 80 years old. Not one of the men came out taking off his clothes — they just came out and sang. What's wrong with us doing that? I want us to take a stand and let people know that we are women of substance. Yes, we are beautiful and sensual, but we've got something to say.

— Elizabeth Jardina

MEMBERS of Juanita Ulloa and Mariachi Picante are (clockwise from left) Manuel Constancio, Ayla Davila, Carol Eacret, Juanita Ulloa, Virginia Morgan, and Isaac Peña. Not pictured is Jose Roberto and harpist Donelle Page.

SEAN CONNELLEY
— Staff

