

## **The Snowy Mariachi Musician**

By Carlos Machado

“Rain, shine, and even snow... Mariachi will prevail,” is the phrase that accompanies the image of Canadian photographer Cameron Frazier, who shot Alex Alegría, a Mexican Mariachi, walking the snowy streets of Vancouver this January. In the photo, Alegría, guitar case in hand, splendidly (if inadequately) dressed in a red-and-white *charro* suit and sombrero, trudges through drifts and huge falling flakes next to the iconic Vancouver Steam Clock in Gastown. A city that gets painted in white in his honor to compose the perfect image of two cultures that hold each other. A syncretism that reminds us that being an immigrant is embracing two cultures and contributing in the construction of our society. Today, the photograph has become a global phenomenon, that represents not only his story but the story of many immigrants to Canada.

It was this same historic neighbourhood where Mariachi music was first embraced 17 years ago, on May 5, 2003, during *Cinco de Mayo*, the annual holiday commemorating the 1862 Mexican victory over France. It was on this date that Alegría reclaimed his Mexican roots and, in so doing, brought Mariachi to the Vancouver music scene.

Frazier’s remarkable photo went viral on the Internet because of the notable juxtaposition of snow and cold with an outfit so representative of the heat and languor of Mexico. For Alegría, however, the photo celebrates Canadian multiculturalism, and how the country has embraced the 250 different ethnic ancestries who make their home here, united by a shared commonality of extreme Canadian winters.

Alegría, 43, was born in Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, where he lived most of his juvenile years until he relocated to Acapulco city to study tourism. He moved to Vancouver 23 years ago, first on a student exchange. He decided to stay, ending up working in an aluminum factory to pay the bills. But, like so many immigrants to Canada, the sense of what was lost felt greater, at first, than the kindness and welcome of his new home. Alegría ached for the music and culture — the sunshine — of his homeland. Soon, the heavy weight of

depression settled upon his young shoulders. “The winter here is dark and gray; it was very difficult to make friends. There were no *tortillas*,” says Alegría. He calls this the “cultural adaptation dilemma,” when people from other parts of the world pull up roots, only to find uncertainty, loneliness and nostalgia filling the gap that is left behind. Alegría would have to find something to fill this emptiness, or possibly spiral downwards too far to ever reemerge.

So, one day, Alegría went to Robson Street in downtown Vancouver, dressed in a *charro* suit and his guitar. He began playing the songs of Mexico. He didn’t care if no one stopped to listen. He didn’t care if no one liked his music. Suddenly, here on Robson Street, with its high-end designer shops, Alegría, strumming and crooning to traditional Latin rhythms, was home again. “I wanted the workday to be over. I was longing to get to the streets, just with my guitar and start playing music. It was my moment of relief,” says Alegría.

Then, Alegría started composing Mariachi songs, even though he had never studied music before. Mariachi has ancient roots, coming from Jalisco but its origin isn’t known accurately. But when people think of Mexican music, dynamic, energetic, with its chorus of male voices, Mariachi comes to mind. Alegría, who jokes that he “decomposes” as much as composes, began writing songs in the Mariachi style. His fame grew locally and he was joined by other musicians as he busked in the streets. First, a symphony violinist then a jazz trumpeter joined him. Over time, more musicians joined the street band. In 2003 they were enough to become an official Mariachi and got hired to perform in a Mexican celebration in Gastown.

They called their new family *Romántico Mariachi*, later changing their name to *Mariachi Los Dorados*, as eulogy to Pancho Villa, a revolutionary general and one of the most prominent figures of the Mexican revolution, whose army was also called *Los Dorados*.

*Mariachi Los Dorados* became a reflection of Canada's vibrant multiculturalism, with 12 band members, including Alegría. Three were from Mexico, two from Ukraine, one from China, another from Taiwan, one from the Philippines, one from Italy and one Indigenous musician from Whitehorse in Canada's northern Yukon. "It is great that we can deliver a positive message and show all the good things we can contribute as immigrants," Alegría says.

They held daily rehearsals, eventually becoming so good that they decided to join the annual Mariachi's festival in Guadalajara in western Mexico in 2009 to share their music, but also aiming to perfect their style while expanding their network, which led them to meet and share unforgettable moments with different Mariachi bands from all over the world.

*Mariachi Los Dorados* has participated in different events and festivities throughout Vancouver. They performed five times at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, throughout Metro Vancouver's city halls, the annual Celebration of Lights summer fireworks contest at English Bay and at many cultural activities organized by the Consulate General of Mexico in Vancouver. *Mariachi Los Dorados* also performs every Wednesday and Friday nights in Mexican restaurants in Vancouver and North Vancouver and the group has released four albums. The first features Alegría as a solo artist, the other three with *Mariachi Los Dorados*. The last one features original songs.

In the future, says Alegría, the group will increase its repertoire, enriching Vancouver with a diversity of Mexican music. It is a mission that has accelerated, thanks to Frazier's viral photography. The image swept the globe thanks to social media, with more than 32 million views on Facebook. He is now getting calls from different media in Canada, Mexico and the US, and more recently other countries requesting interviews. The Mariachi is also getting hired for shows, music tours and concerts in Canada and Mexico. He even started a *Youtube chanel* on request from Vanvouverites who want to know more about the Mariachi and Mexican culture. "It is the storm that changed my life," Alegría says.