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TELEVISION

Tracking the music of Mexico

FILM FOLLOWS MUSICIANS ON TREK ACROSS BORDER

By Andrew Gilbert
Special to the Mercury News

Eugene Rodriguez didn't plan on becoming a documentary filmmaker.

As the founder and director of the Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center in San Pablo, the San Francisco Conservatory-trained guitarist has dedicated his adult life to teaching urban kids in the Richmond area about traditional Mexican styles of music and dance. Since founding the center in the late 1980s, he has turned his first generation of students into his faculty — and an acclaimed, Grammy-nominated ensemble.

Along the way, the musicians in Los Cenzontles (The Mockingbirds) have forged strong ties with master musicians south of the border. It's a journey Rodriguez decided to capture in 2003 by producing a documentary, "El Pasajero," as he and his musicians met, studied and performed with veteran mariachis thrilled by the resurgence of interest in their art form.

Monday, KTEH (Ch. 54) will present the premiere broadcast of another film produced by Rodriguez, "Fandango: Searching for the White Monkey," as part of the 12th season of its marvelously wide-ranging Video I series.

The one-hour film is the second in what now is a planned trilogy of documentaries from Rodriguez. It is an ambitious undertaking inspired by his desire to tell the cultural tale behind the music on Los Cenzontles' critically praised CDs.

"We've made a number of albums, and that's something we'll continue to do, but there's a story behind these projects," he explained backstage recently at the Freight & Salvage folk music club in Berkeley after Los Cenzontles had finished a rousing, well-attended performance.

"Our friend Dan Sheehy, the director of Smithsonian Folkways Records, would always tell me, 'You guys have a great story,' so we set out to tell that story."

ARMANDO QUINTERO

COURTESY OF EUGENE RODRIGUEZ

An all-night dance party in Veracruz, above. Eugene Rodriguez, left, is dedicated to preserving traditional Mexican music and dance.

'Fandango: Searching for the White Monkey'
10 p.m. Monday, KTEH (Ch. 54)

While the first film captured the band's relationships with mariachi artists in the central Pacific coast Mexican state of Jalisco, "Fandango" documents a two-decade relationship with rural musicians in the semitropical Caribbean region of Veracruz, where the African influence in Mexican culture is strongly felt in the *son jarocho* musical style.

Like "El Pasajero," "Fandango" was directed and edited by Mexico City-based director Ricardo Broajos and centers on the interaction between older Mexican musicians, particularly the group Mono Blanco, and Los Cenzontles' young, mostly Latino musicians from the East Bay.

Moving back and forth in time, the film captures the lush beauty of the countryside and the unnerving power of the rural landscape on the Bay Area musicians. The film doesn't gloss over the difficulties in any cross-cultural exchange. Some of the most poignant scenes capture the relief felt by the musician who don't speak Spanish a they discover that the musi can serve as a foundation fo friendship.

"We've been working t build this bridge between Cal ifornia and Veracruz," Rodri guez says. "There's this re naissance happening in Cali fornia with mostly urba kids, and 'Fandango' tells th story of how it happened an how it impacted the individu als involved.

"The contemporary stor is that we took our grou down to Veracruz to live on ranch, which is very rustic with no running water o modern toilets. It ended u being almost like a reality T show. 'Let's make everybod uncomfortable and fil them.' "

Played on harps, small gui tars such as the eight-strin *jarana* and four-string *requin to jarocho* and such percus sion instruments as the *pan dero* (frame drum) and *quija da* (made from a donke jawbone), *son jarocho* is loose, conversational style i which several singers ex change improvised verse ("La Bamba" is a *son jarocho*)

Dancers perform on

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raised wooden platform *(tarima)* with their resounding, syncopated footwork serving as the primary percussive element. While the music's pulse is influenced by West Africa, the elegant dance involves a minimum of hip and shoulder movement.

The film explores how *son jarocho* and *fandangos,* the all-night dance parties that long were the center of rural life, almost died out in the 1970s when young people lost interest in the music. Just as Los Cenzontles has helped spark a renaissance of Mexican culture in Northern California, it also has helped spur a growing interest in traditional styles within Mexico (a phenomenon explored more in "El Pasajero" than in "Fandango").

Los Cenzontles traces its roots to a 1989 California Arts Council artist-in-residency grant. Rodriguez incorporated the center as a non-profit organization in 1994, and it gained notoriety quickly with the Grammy-nominated recording "Papa's Dream," a collaboration with Los Lobos.

A crime wave that took the lives of several Richmond teenagers added urgency to the newly founded center's mission, and the enrollment for its music classes surged. More than a decade later, the center continues to collect accolades and prestigious grants for its work.

The decision to launch the documentary project was partly in response to the end of state funding for the program. A grant from the James Irvine Foundation made the films possible.

"That opened up a whole new branch for us," Rodriguez says. "Just doing the school, there was limited funding for that, so this was another way for us to bring more revenue into the organization, through touring and sales and broadcasts. Our youth program has suffered the most from the loss of state funding, and that's our lifeblood, where our performers come from."

SILVIA GONZALEZ DE LEON

Two young dancers — he's from Richmond and she's from Veracruz — in the Mexican village of Pajapan.

While making the films has been an arduous process, Rodriguez is determined to finish the trilogy. He already is at work on the last installment, which will tell the unlikely story of the scrappy Mexican-American cultural center that has become a vital repository of Mexican folklore.

"I know I have one more documentary in me, and then I'm not doing any more," he says. "They're difficult to fund, difficult to make, and I realized that I'm a musician, that's what I like doing.

"The third one is about our group, about Mexican-Americans and the process of art and how it brings people together, and the challenges we've faced as a group and as individuals. Right now I'm in the thick of it, sorting through lots of transcripts. It really brings everything back home."