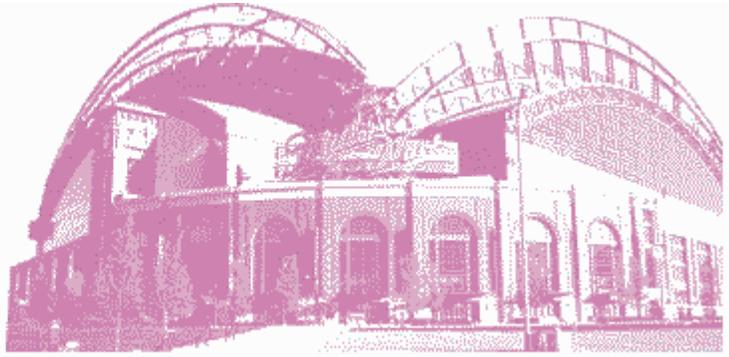




¡Aqui!

MILWAUKEE



Organizers put the fest in fiestas

By Henry P. Bruno



Milwaukee markets itself as the city of festivals. Area promoters, including those planning two major Hispanic celebrations, face the daunting task of living up to reputation.

Planning the Hispanic festivals presents challenges and rewards, organizers say. One group, Mexican Fiesta, has the pressure to produce the same quality festival known for year after year. The other, Latin Music Fest, is working to make a name for itself in festival-rich Milwaukee without the benefit of a long tradition.

Both organizations can attest to the hard work it takes to prepare festivals that succeed, not only financially but also in their representation of the Latino culture.

Humble beginnings

Over the last 30 years, it also has grown into a three-day celebration of not only Mexican culture but also the traditions of Hispanic Americans in general.

In 1977, Mexican Fiesta organizers accepted the invitation to move to Henry Meier Festival Park (Summerfest grounds), where it remains. The 2005 celebration runs Friday, Aug. 26, through Sunday, Aug. 28. Attendance has averaged about 70,000 over the last few years, though last year's dipped slightly because of bad weather.

Latin Music Fest is the newcomer on the block of festivals in the Milwaukee area. Established in 2002 by Tina Elmergreen, Latin Music Fest presents music from a variety of Latin American genres.

The two-day Latin Music Fest is held at State Fair Park in West Allis. The third annual event is Saturday, Sept. 17, and Sunday, Sept. 18.

Year-round planning

A two- or three-day festival is not planned in two or three days; it is a year-round process.

The League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, local chapter No. 9900 was the initial sponsor of Mexican Fiesta. In 1987, the organization was renamed and incorporated as the Wisconsin Hispanic Scholar Foundation Inc. Although the name changed, the mission remained to raise funds for higher education scholarships for Hispanic students in Wisconsin and to help maintain Mexican and other Hispanic cultures by holding an annual authentic festival. The foundation provides about \$80,000 in scholarships each year.

In addition to Mexican Fiesta, events such as taco dinners and golf tournaments generate much of the money and keep the planning committee occupied throughout the year. Oscar Cervera, Mexican Fiesta director, relies on a staff of volunteers from local Hispanic fraternities and sororities to help plan and staff the events.

The festival's longevity and reputation enable it to attract some of the best-known music acts. This year's line for example, includes Alejandra Guzmán, billed as Mexico's "foremost exponent of Rock en Español"; and Michael Salgado, Maribel Guardia, Montez de Durango, David Lee Garza y los Musicales, and Banda Origin. Limón de Salvador Lizarraca.

Elmergreen owns a company called in2it international that focuses on event planning, consulting, promotion and representing Hispanic artists with various specialties. She taps those resources and her experience in show business for Latin Music Fest fund-raisers. She brings in Latin performers from all over the country, sometimes from the world.

"I am fortunate to know people from all around the country who book Latin American performers," Elmergreen says. "We have brought in well-known groups to play in Milwaukee that otherwise only played in Illinois."

Entertainers lined up so far for the 2005 Latin Music Fest include world-renowned Cuban jazz pianist Ignacio "Nachito" Herrera; Chucky Santos and his Bachata group from the Dominican Republic; and Inzignia, a pop, and hip-hop group from Miami. Additional headliners are scheduled to be announced later this summer.

Latin Music Fest's main promotional vehicle is "Sabor Latino," a weekly bilingual Latin radio show that airs from 7 to 8 p.m. Sundays on AM540. Elmergreen and Eduardo Arauz of Nicaragua host the show.

Income generated from the fund-raisers and the festival goes right back into the Latin Music Fest fund.

Attractions draw crowds

Mexican Fiesta transforms the Summerfest grounds into "little Mexico" for three days every summer. Popular events include dance, jalapeño eating and costume and car hoppin' contests.

But the crowd's favorite contest may be El Grito. El Grito is the Mexican tradition of screaming a long and boisterous chant to a favorite song. It takes strong lungs and a zest for "Ranchero music" to let out a grito worthy of joining this contest.

While the lakefront festival has grown, the focus remains on its Mexican roots.

Latin Music Fest cannot compete with Mexican Fiesta's traditions quite yet, but it does offer a wide variety of representation from Latin America. Its founder and director envisions providing a venue for as many Latin American countries as possible to represent their music, food and culture.

Elmergreen's goal for the Latin Music Fest is to need the entire grounds of State Fair Park someday.

"It would truly represent Latin America if we could have little pocket festivals within Latin Music Fest," Elmergreen says. "The more representation of Latin countries, the better."

The growing Hispanic population of southeastern Wisconsin reflects that representation, which is encouraging news for festival organizers, not only in Milwaukee but also in Waukesha and Racine, as they bring together Hispanics celebrating similar traditions and interests.

For information:

Mexican Fiesta: (414) 383-7066, www.mexicanfiesta.org.

Latin Music Fest: (414) 297-9050, www.latinmusicfest.org.

Tina Elmergreen

"The population is substantial enough in Milwaukee to have more than one Hispanic festival."

Tina Elmergreen

Latin Music Fest founder

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