



THE DOUBLE MAJOR

Music and anthropology are still the areas of concentration for Juan Díes, co-founder of the Grammy-nominated Sones de México Ensemble.

by Jonathan Graham / PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONES DE MEXICO



Sones de Mexico: foreground Victor Pichardo, (back, l-r) Juan Rivera, Juan Días '88, Zacbé Pichardo, Javier Saume and Lorena Iniguez

In a workroom in the center of his condo on the north side of Chicago, Juan Días '88 has twenty-five guitars of different sizes and shapes (jaranas, requintos, guitarrones, leonas, bajos sextos, etc.) tucked away in cases, high on built-in shelves. But the instrument he claims as his favorite has no case. It is a four-stringed African guitar with neck of rough, unfinished wood, a body made from a metal gallon can that once held household disinfectant and strings made out of fishing line. It has a twang — more banjo than guitar — and Días has treasured it for nearly 25 years.

Días is co-founder, producer and C.E.O. of Sones de Mexico Ensemble, a two-time GRAMMY-nominated band known for its celebrated performances of Mexican folk music and its educational programs for young and old. A student of music and anthropology during his Earlham years, he maintains a passion for both subjects today. Which explains the tin can guitar.

“When I was in Kenya on the Earlham program [led by Professor of History Frank Chiteji], I met James Lokol, a teenage Tswana boy in Kakokol who helped me with a project

to gather folk songs from members of his tribe. He made this wonderful instrument, but what he really coveted was my guitar,” he says. “We played together on the beach a few times. These were very memorable times for me.”

Días is a large, broad shouldered man with glasses and an impeccable mustache and goatee. Holding the improbable-looking device in dexterous hands, he plucks a few notes — it does indeed produce music.

“I took an inexpensive guitar with me on the program, thinking that if anything happened to it, it would be no big deal. So before

I came back to the States, he and I traded. We both walked away thinking that we had gotten the better part of the deal!”

Díes stayed in Kenya for another term after the formal program ended and collected 150 songs from members of a remote tribe, which he recorded, transcribed with musical notation and translated into English for his senior thesis with the help of two Turkana High School students, David Ero Lochampa and Zorastes Ngilimo.

“When I speak to [Sociology-Anthropology Professors] Steve Butler and Dan Rosenberg, they still remember that ambitious project. I almost didn’t finish it on time,” says Díes.

After graduation, he earned a master’s degree in ethnomusicology and folklore at Indiana University, and then embarked on a career that has always combined music and culture.

Díes immigrated with his parents and younger brother from San Luis Potosi, Mexico to Indianapolis at age 18. His English was limited at the time, but he had a record collection with music from different parts of the world, including English-speaking artists like Yes, Pink Floyd and Queen who, he says, helped him learn English much faster. Music remains his lingua franca.

HE QUIT HIS DAY JOB

For 13 years, Díes was director of community outreach at the Old Town School of Folk Music, where he was hired to use his cross-cultural skills to diversify the school’s programs, staff and clientele to match Chicago’s ethnically diverse population. Here he worked with hundreds of artists and cut his teeth as a presenter and a curator of cultural programs.

Soon after Díes began working at the Old Town School, he and Victor Pichardo — an acclaimed composer and instrumentalist from Mexico City— formed the Sones de México Ensemble. For most of the time that he worked at the Old Town School, he would leave work at five and head directly to rehearsals and performances. The band soon found a niche, at one point playing as many as 160 gigs in a single year. Eventually, Díes decided that he could no longer do both jobs.

At the end of 2005, he left the Old Town School to devote his full energy to the Sones de México Ensemble.

“I always thought that there would come a time when I could no longer do both jobs; I just didn’t think I would end up choosing the job without the steady paycheck and benefits,” Díes says. “But I felt that I had accom-

plished as much as I was going to at the school, and there was still a lot of untapped potential for growth in the band.”

Díes, who plays various instruments including guitarron (a six-string fretless bass) with the band, has produced all the group’s CDs and does extensive community outreach work on behalf of the band, sometimes traveling to a city where the group will have a residency weeks before a scheduled concert in order to connect with local community leaders. With a relaxed manner and a gift for articulating his love for music, Díes seems perfectly suited to split his time between making music and attending to the business end of the band.

DEEP MUSICAL ROOTS

“My mother says I picked up a guitar when I was six-years-old,” Díes says. “I know I can’t remember a time when music wasn’t a big part of my life. I learned a lot from friends and from listening to records.”

He is sitting at his dining room table. In addition to hardwood floors, marble countertops and brightly colored ceramic tiles in the kitchen, the unit has more unusual features. Every room has XLR inputs and outputs so that he and his fellow musicians can plug in amplifiers and instruments wherever they like. The living room has a little furniture, but includes a set of large, custom-built drums, in a variety of sizes that are painted in vibrant reds and greens, including one made to look like an insect, with mallets for antennae. In his office, as one might expect, he has a large and varied collection of music on CD and cassette.

Music also played a large role in his Earlham experience. He played in the jazz ensemble under the direction of Professor of Music Dan Graves, a role that initially left him out of his depth.

“At the end of my freshman year, I signed up for a new Big Band jazz ensemble that was forming in the fall. But when they gave me the charts, I realized I didn’t really know what I was doing. That summer, I had to go through the music, figure out the guitar chords, and learn the pieces from there. I spent a lot of time getting up to speed, and I learned as much about Jazz that summer as if I had taken an independent study course,” he recalls. He also hosted a vintage jazz show on WECCI-FM, which gave him another opportunity to learn.

Dies also performed with many different student musical groups. During new student

orientation as a freshman, he formed a barbershop quartet with fellow residents of Bundy Hall (Ross Veatch ’88, David Joseph ’88, Bain Testa and Jim Alston). With Phil Newman ’88 and David Swanson ’86, he played in a guitar trio (which, with due Quaker humility, they dubbed “The Guitar Studs”). He also played in a jazz combo with Greg Miller ’88, Jon Claney ’88 and David Birenbaum. In 1985, Díes played in a band called “Divest,” drawing on the political climate of the times, when many in the community were calling on the College to shed its investments in South Africa. While the band members did support the political cause, Díes reports that the playlist was devoted to covers of Top 40 songs, rather than political material. Other members of Divest were Tracy Triplet ’84, Nick Steenberg, Donnie Sawyer and Bill Osler (with guests Julianna Van Sant, Donna Evelyn and Paul Mescart).

As he recalls these groups, he shows me old cassette tapes of campus concerts from his student days and shares stories of former band mates with whom he is still in occasional contact as well as those he hasn’t been in touch with for years. It’s clear that he has great memories of the “breadboxes” in the dining hall (as open mic nights were known in those days) and other gigs for his campus bands. But when the conversation turns to his own academic performance as a music student, Díes’ voice is quieter and his mood is a bit wistful, particularly when talking about his relationship with his music professors Eleanore Vail and the late Manfred Blum.

“I studied music theory with Manfred, and that opened a whole other way of looking at music to me. He was an orchestra conductor, so he would bring a conductor’s score, and play parts of it on the piano, talking about how the different pieces fit together. It was amazing how he could look into the minds of composers like Bela Bartok, talk about what they might have been thinking while composing a certain piece and then show us what Stravinsky has in common with Mozart,” Díes recalls.

“Manfred and I became friends beyond a typical teacher-student relationship. He wrote to me when I was in Kenya, gave me books to read and was very interested in what I was doing there. But I think he was disappointed in how I did in music theory comps as a senior. I did O.K., but not great. Unfortunately, he died not long after I graduated, so he didn’t get to see the success I have had as a musician.”



A couple of years after graduation, Díes returned to Mexican music.

“I suddenly realized how little people knew about Mexican music and culture, how riddled my culture was by stereotypes that inspired little respect and understanding and how little anyone was doing about it,” says Díes.

He began to perform corridos (Mexican tragic ballads) to which he added his own translations and storytelling in English in order to bridge the language gap. He also formed “Los Coyotes” in 1990, most likely the first mariachi band in Bloomington, Ind.

BUILDING A REPUTATION

Díes and his band mates are not yet making much more than a modest living from their music, but they are gaining national and international recognition. Known as Chicago’s premier ensemble performing Mexican “son” music, Sones de Mexico Ensemble’s 2007 album, “Esta Tierra Es Tuya” (This Land Is Your Land), was nominated for both GRAMMY and Latin GRAMMY awards. They have toured extensively in the United States, performing at such high profile venues as the popular radio program “A Prairie Home Companion” with Garrison Keillor.

“Son” is a multifaceted folk music that encompasses musical styles from various regions of Mexico with Native, European and African roots. The form can use a wide range of instruments from guitars and percussion to woodwinds and brass. In concert, Sones de

Mexico Ensemble uses more than 30 acoustic instruments to play traditional Mexican folk tunes with original arrangements that experiment with Irish, classical, country and western, jazz, rock and other styles.

The band is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, and a key element of their work is educational outreach particularly to Mexican-American communities throughout the U.S.

“There are growing Mexican communities all over the country, but there aren’t always cultural programs geared toward this population,” notes Díes. “A lot of community organizations or arts centers figure that offering a concert is a good way to begin to reach out to those communities. We understand this, and we try to do more than just play the music. We are able to both entertain people through our concerts and also educate them about how this music fits into Mexican history and culture.”

This work has taken the band all over the United States, including a recent residency sponsored by the Lincoln Center Institute (the educational arm of the Lincoln Center) in New York City. In 2008 they were even featured in the World Folk Song Festival in Beijing, China.

“Our trip to China was bizarre,” he says. Underscoring the unglamorous aspects of life as a touring musician, Díes notes that the night before they flew to China, the band played a concert in Lacrosse, Wis., drove back to Chicago, rested for a couple hours, then headed to the airport to check the more than two-dozen instruments the sextet

plays in concert. The band presented a concert and a lecture/demonstration at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. Forty-eight hours later, they were back in Illinois, playing a gig at an elementary school.

“A lot of what we do is perform in schools, and that is very important,” Díes says. “One of the main reasons we started this group was to preserve this form of music and to give people a sense of Mexican folk music that goes beyond the stereotypes we see on film, TV and beach tourism ads.”

For Díes, being in the Sones de Mexico Ensemble has been an opportunity to learn more about the music and culture of his native country and then share this knowledge with others, Mexican and non-Mexican alike.

“When people from Mexico see us play at the Kennedy Center or Orchestra Hall or, next year at Carnegie Hall, it says to them that this music is important, and on equal footing with classical music or other forms of music,” he says. “At some school shows, a kid will come up to me after a show, tug on my shirt and say, ‘Hey, I’m Mexican.’ I see it as an expression of pride. Mexican kids (and adults) respond when they see a quality representation of their culture. They realize they don’t have to be embarrassed about where they come from. It’s an important thing.”

Learn about Juan Díes’ band and listen to their music at www.sonesdemexico.com.