TEACHER: *Cesar Augusto Castro Gonzalez now teaches* el son jarocho *locally. Here he plays a* jarana, *an eight-string rhythmic guitar.*

Photographs by FRANCINE ORR *Los Angeles Times*

THE CRAFT: *Castro spends time making* jaranas *and* requintos *in his El Sereno home workshop, where wood, molds and completed instruments hang from the walls. "I make a good instrument all the time," he says with pride.*

He's carved out a musical niche

Mexican native carries on the craft of folkloric instrument-making in L.A.

By KRISTOPHER FORTIN
Special to The Times

Cesar Augusto Castro Gonzalez found his calling when he went looking for a buddy to play some soccer during recess.

Castro was attending middle school in the Mexican coastal city of Veracruz and was told he could find his friend, Omar, at a workshop that taught young people how to play traditional music known as *el son jarocho*. Castro found Omar and was immediately drawn to the sound of an eight-string rhythmic guitar, the *jarana*.

"The happiness of the *jarana* really just got me," Castro said. He was 13 at the time. In two years, he was giving lessons. Today, at 31, he continues to teach in Los Angeles and make instruments at a tiny workshop tucked behind his home overlooking El Sereno.

Castro specializes in making *jaranas* and *requintos*, guitar-like instruments that are key components and the most familiar parts of *el son jarocho*, or "the Veracruz sound." Castro's experience has made him comfortable expressing pride in his work.

"I make a good instrument all the time," Castro said.

Although Castro grew up in Veracruz, he had never come across the rural folk music of the region, which uses various stringed instruments and percussion to orchestrate a song, or *son*. To U.S. ears, perhaps the best example of the *jarocho* style is "La Bamba."

When Castro visited that first *son jarocho* workshop, Omar was embarrassed. This was country music, most often played by "old people," he said.

But Castro was already captivated by the sound, and he asked to hear more. Teacher Andres Alfonso had Castro play along with the rest of the group. Soon, he started attending the class that spring semester in 1990.

When the school year and class ended, Castro's father enrolled him in workshops taught by members of the group Mano Blanco, champions of the rural *son jarocho* tradition. When school resumed, Castro continued Alfonso's workshop Tuesdays and Thursdays and Mano Blanco's workshops Mondays and Wednesdays.

He sometimes kept his *jarana* at his side while he slept, and he played just about everywhere — waiting for the bus, walking down the street or, once, even in the bathroom. "I was practicing a scale I learned earlier," he explained.

Castro also took up other instruments, such as the bass-like *león*, and a folkloric dance, *el zapateado*. The first lesson he received in *lauderia*, making and maintaining instruments, resulted when he needed to slim his *requinto*'s neck — it was hard for him to grip and move from note to note. He asked Gilberto Gutierrez, director of Mano Blanco, for help.

Castro said, "When I asked Gilberto to fix my *requinto* he said, 'Yes, but you're going to do it . . . and I'm going to show you.' "

But the more time Castro spent with music, the more distant he became with his boyhood friends. Yet he took comfort in becoming closer to his fellow musicians.

"They offered friendship openly," Castro said. "They never made you feel like you didn't belong."

The members of Mano Blanco invited him to play with them at fandangos, jam sessions in the most rudimentary form, in rural areas on weekends.

"I had one foot in the city and one foot in the ranchos," Castro said.

After Mano Blanco broke up, he took over teaching its music classes. With an adult musician in town, Pablo Aboleda, he also taught *lauderia*, while learning more about the craft from Aboleda. Castro started making and selling small guitars, just 12 inches long, for 500 pesos.

"Working on these small pieces of wood helped me learn how to handle the tools," he said.

In time Castro played professionally throughout Mexico, Latin America and the United States. In 2001, he played a gig at Self Help Graphics in East Los Angeles, where he met local musicians, such as members of Ozomatli, Quetzal and Castro's future wife, Xochi Flores-Castro.

On latimes.com
Folk music of Veracruz

For a slide show with audio of Castro performing, go to **latimes.com/jarocho.**

Castro's relationship with her grew stronger, despite the distance. "It was becoming difficult to maintain because I always had to get a visa every time I wanted to come and visit Xochi," he said.

Finally, traveling became too much and he moved to Los Angeles in 2004. "Love made me emigrate. I just fell in love with Xochi," Castro said.

Castro had established contacts in Los Angeles from past visits, so they helped him start teaching *el son jarocho* workshops at places including Eastside Café in El Sereno and Imix Bookstore in Eagle Rock.

"I think he's a valuable asset, not just in *son jarocho* but in the community," said student Laura Cambron, a former member of the Santa Ana-based group Son del Centro.

Castro demands a complete understanding of the *jarocho* style and of each *son*. "He's so good at being holistic," Cambron said. "If you don't know the context and baseline, he makes sure that you learn."

Besides gigs, classes, spontaneous jam sessions, composing and taking care of his children — 8-month-old Sofia, and stepdaughters Tonantzin, 14, and Luna, 9 — Castro spends the rest of his time making *jaranas* and *requintos* in his wood shop, where pieces of wood, molds and completed instruments hang from the walls.

"He tells me not to be afraid to interrupt his work," his wife said. "If I need help with the kids, he is always ready to help."

She added, "He slaps us out of our madness. He brings a really old way of thinking, like eating dinner together."

At his workshop, Castro demonstrated the early steps of creating a *jarana*. He drew the outline of the *jarana* on a solid piece of mahogany, and using an electric saw, cut out the basic shape in five minutes.

"That's the easy part," Castro said.

Unlike a guitar, which has the bottom and top attached to the curving sides, Castro's *jaranas* are mostly one piece. He carves out the middle and attaches a top later.

Tuning pegs, the bridge and fret board are carved out of a hardwood known as African padauk. The top is either dark cedar, which lends a "sweetness" to the sound, or spruce, for "a little brighter" sound.

His aim, Castro said, is to make every instrument like the first one he made. That instrument, a *jarana*, was completed when he was 14 and under the supervision of Gutierrez.

"I still own it, and it is still one of the best guitars I have ever made," he said. "All the work I've done, it's turning back and saying here's your prize."