

Lerma's groundbreaking kicks off \$2.2 million restoration



Susan Segura of the Esperanza talks about the restoration of Lerma's.

One of the longest-running live conjunto music venues in the state, San Antonio's Lerma's Nite Club building, was saved from demolition in 2010 and eventually earned a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. A groundbreaking ceremony at the site on Monday, July 15, 2019 brought out former mayor, Nelson Wolff and current San Antonio mayor, Ron Nirenberg, among a plethora of politicians, activists, musicians, artists and San Antonio conjunto aficionados. Initially opened in 1948 by Pablo Lerma who loved conjunto music—the night club fell on hard times in recent years until community folks joined forces to preserve the building and formed the Save Lerma's Coalition. Highlighting Lerma's historic and cultural significance the group asked the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center to guide the building's fate as its new owner. The Esperanza accepted the challenge and became Lerma's caretaker in 2012. In 2015, Lerma's was voted Texas' Most Endangered Landmark. In 2016, the city awarded the Esperanza Center \$500,000 to rehabilitate the building. Bexar County then followed suit and matched the same amount of money finalizing the funding this year (2019). Once considered an eyesore, the building housing Lerma's Nite Club is about to undergo a \$2.2 million restoration and will be transformed into a Non-profit Latino cultural arts center, the first of its kind funded by the city and county in over 30 years. Susana Segura of the Esperanza, who has spearheaded the campaign to save Lerma's says, "grassroots mobilizing is essential to Latino preservation. It's about recognizing working-class people, including their architecture and history." To Segura, the success of Lerma's preservation speaks to a powerful sense of cultural community pride. The venerable Bexar County Commissioner, Paul Elizondo, suggested adding an additional bibliotech for the city at Lerma's and that certainly is one of several possibilities for the five areas of the building that includes restoring the night club, itself. To be sure, the groundbreaking ceremony signals the beginning of a new life for Lerma's Nite Club.



Staff members of the Esperanza join in on the groundbreaking for the historic restoration of Lerma's on San Antonio's westside.



The group, Panfilo's Güera, led by violinist, Belén, play at the Lerma's groundbreaking.

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Las Tesoros—Beatriz Llamas (L) and Blanca Rodríguez (R) at the Lerma's Nite Club groundbreaking.

Las Tesoros at Lerma's

The two surviving members of Las Tesoros de San Antonio, Beatriz Llamas (aka La Paloma del Norte) and Blanca Rodríguez (aka Blanca Rosa) were present at the Lerma's groundbreaking and remember performing at the historic Lerma's. Blanca noted that if you hadn't performed at Lerma's "you weren't known, because that's how famous this place was." Beatriz expressed appreciation to the Esperanza Center for what it's doing to restore Lerma's Nite Club exclaiming, "It's like an old lady when they renew the whole body!" The National Endowment of the Arts has bequeathed one of 2019's nine National Heritage Fellowships to Beatriz and Blanca of Las Tesoros de San Antonio. Originated in 1982, the fellowship is granted each year to selected "master folk and traditional artists" in recognition of "the ways these individuals demonstrate and reflect our nation's living cultural heritage and share their knowledge with the next generation." Rodríguez and Llamas will be traveling to Washington D.C. in September to receive their award carrying with them the memory of the deceased Tesoros: Rita Vidaurri, La Calandria and Janet Cortez, La Perla Tapatia. The October issue of La Voz will share the experience with our readers and the Tesoro's many fans.