



# Beatriz Llamas and Blanquita Rodríguez of Las Tesoros de San Antonio

## 2019 NEA National Heritage Fellowship Recipients

The National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship—the nation’s highest honor for folk and traditional artists—was bestowed on our own Tesoros de San Antonio: Beatriz Llamas (“La Paloma del Norte”) and Blanquita Rodríguez (“Blanca Rosa”). The NEA National Heritage Fellowships recognize the recipients’ artistic excellence and their contributions to our living cultural heritage. Beatriz and Blanquita were honored along with eight fellow recipients at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. on Wednesday, September 18th and performed in a grand concert in D.C. on Friday, September 20th.



Blanquita Rodríguez (left) and Beatriz Llamas

tions of San Antonio’s Westside cultura with their renditions of ranchera music of the Texas/Mexico border and stories of their incredible singing careers surviving and thriving through the 40s, 50s and 60s when women had to surmount obstacles of racial, gender and economic discrimination.

Originally nominated for the fellowship when the Tesoros included the four elders, the selection of the remaining Tesoros comes at a time when Beatriz and Blanquita continue to meet the challenges of singing while both, in their 80s face daunting health issues.

Las Tesoros de San Antonio have two CDs, *Las Estrellas de Ayer*, *Las*

*Tesoros de Hoy* (2016), which is a compilation CD of vintage recordings and *Que Cosa es el Amor* (2017). They have also been featured in *Still Here: Homenaje al Westside de San Antonio* (2018) a book and CD that pays homage to San Antonio’s Westside through the stories of twelve elders who relate *el convivir de esos tiempos*—recalling the essence of those times with music by Las Tesoros de San Antonio and other acclaimed San Antonio musicians including past recipients of the National Heritage Fellowship, Flaco Jiménez and Eva Ybarra among other stars. Today, the remaining Tesoros, Blanca and Beatriz, continue to be part of the select group of Texas Commission on the Arts Texas Touring Roster.

### ¡Arte Es Vida!

Through the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center’s *Arte Es Vida* project, Blanca and Beatriz have performed as part of Las Tesoros de San Antonio in venues throughout Texas and outside of the state. The group of elder women who were recording stars in their own right from the 40s to the 70s originally included deceased members, Janet Cortez (Perla Tapatia) and Rita Vidaurri (La Calandria). The four elder singers were brought out of retirement after a tribute to Lydia Mendoza in 2000 who was honored as an NEA National Heritage Fellowship recipient in 1982.

Las Tesoros were brought together by the Esperanza to preserve Mexican and bicultural musical expressions highlighting the contribu-



Poster comprised of vintage photos of Las Tesoros de San Antonio, (Top left clockwise) Rita Vidaurri (La Calandria), Beatriz Llamas (La Paloma del Norte), Janet Cortez (Perla Tapatia) and Blanca Rodríguez (Blanca Rosa)

## Blanca Rodríguez, “Blanca Rosa”



Blanca Rodríguez (Blanca Rosa) was brought up in a musical family in San Antonio, Texas, where she began singing at the age of five. At age 13, Blanca competed in her first performance at the Teatro Guadalupe where she won first place. This led to singing on KCOR radio and at the

Teatro Zaragoza. She toured the U.S. and Mexico, performing with groups like Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, Mariachi América, Mariachi de Ramón Palomar and Los Reyes de Jalisco. Rodríguez has also toured with Mexican singing stars like Amalia Mendoza, Charro Avitia, Vicente Fernández, José Alfredo Jiménez, and Juan Mendoza. In addition to performing, Blanquita, who graduated from Lanier High School in San Antonio’s Westside, went on to have a career in nursing while continuing to teach her students the art of singing. As an octogenarian, Blanquita still owns a cavernous voice and exaggerated style on stage that brings audiences to their feet with her traditional signature songs like La Chancla and Sabor de Engaño.



## Beatriz Llamas and Blanquita Rodríguez of Las Tesoros de San Antonio 2019 NEA National Heritage Fellowship Recipients



BEATRIZ "LA PALOMA DEL NORTE" LLAMAS



BLANQUITA "BLA"



At left, (l to r) Blanca Rodríguez, Rita Vidaurri, Janet Cortez, & Beatriz Llamas, the original Las Tesoros de San Antonio, attend the “Homenaje a Eva Garza y las divas de la canción Mexicana” event in 2013.



## Beatriz Llamas, “La Paloma del Norte”



Beatriz Llamas (La Paloma del Norte) was born in 1938 in Aguascalientes, México. When she was 11, she moved with her mother and sister to Edinburg, Texas, to join her father. Her mother was a singer known as Varita de Nardo who quit singing upon her husband’s insistence. Nevertheless, she taught Beatriz to sing and how to move in front of a mirror adopting a style that would serve her for a lifetime. In 1951, when the family moved to San Antonio Beatriz entered her first talent contest losing to Eva

Ybarra who later was bestowed the 2017 NEA National Heritage Fellow. Rita Vidauri, however, gave Beatriz an opportunity to sing on radio. Llamas gained attention from the owners of Sombrero Records and began recording singles. When she worked with KCOR—one the country’s first full-time, Spanish-language radio stations— she shared the stage with Alberto and Arturo López of Trio Los Osos, the latter whom she was later married. The brothers later died tragically in a fire in Chicago, a story memorialized in the songs, *Vuela Paloma del Norte* and *El Corrido de Mariachi Chapultepec*. Beatriz opened for and toured with many a famous performer most notably opening the show at Madison Square Garden for Antonio Aguilar and Flor Silvestre, the first Tejana to sing in that venerated space. In addition to recording her hit, “Seas Como Seas” and signing a 2-year contract with Bego Records, Beatriz toured nationally with many famous Mexican stars including Miguel Aceves Mejia, Cornelio Reyna and actor, Joaquin Cordero. In 1990 she was honored along with Lydia Mendoza and Rita Vidaurri at the Texas State Capital Rotunda. In 1995, she was inducted into the Tejano Music Hall of Fame and in 1999 she was inducted into the Tejano Conjunto Hall of Fame.



At left the Tesoros’ CD’s—*Las Estrellas de Ayer*, *Las Tesoros de Hoy* (2016), a compilation of vintage recordings and *Que Cosa es el Amor* (2017). *Still Here: Homenaje al Westside de San Antonio* (2018) is a book and CD that pays homage to San Antonio’s Westside with music, stories and photos.

### Trailblazers and Legends

As Las Tesoros de San Antonio, Beatriz and Blanquita, continue the connection to each other and to their comadres, Janet Cortez (Perla Tapatia) and Rita Vidaurri (La Calandria) now singing in heaven. Their much-deserved award validates the traditions of community, convivencia and cultura that preserve our roots and cultivates progress in our comunidades. Trail-

blazers and legends, Beatriz and Blanquita exemplify, not only their talents as traditional ranchera singers in the U.S. but also have exhibited their love of community and culture by returning to the stage as elders to reclaim their places in the world of traditional Mexican American music.

Photos: Esperanza Archives