

Perez, Irvan



Décima Singer and Wood Carver

Wildfowl carver and *décima* singer Irvan Perez was considered Louisiana's foremost representative of traditional Isleño culture. The Isleños are descendants of Canary Islanders who arrived in Louisiana by way of Cuba in the late eighteenth century and settled in five communities in St. Bernard Parish. They have maintained much of their distinctive Hispanic language and culture over many generations. Most Isleños have kept the traditional occupations as small farmers, fishermen, and trappers. Like his father, Irvan worked hard fishing and trapping much of his life. Mr. Perez lived in Poydras with his wife Louise.

Mr. Perez created realistically textured wildfowl and songbirds from cypress roots. He painted his work with oil pigments that he mixed himself. This allowed him to get closer to the birds' natural colors. It took him about twelve hours to paint each piece and much longer to carve them. "If you can make two a month, you're doing good," he said.

Irvan was perhaps the only singer still performing the traditional Isleños ballads known as *décimas*. These songs, characterized by ten-line stanzas, are sung acapella and are considered to be the oldest Spanish language form. They were once a regular part of social gatherings on Delacroix Island. On Saturday nights, families gathered at one of the island's four dance halls, and men took turns singing the *décimas* after the band stopped playing. Many were composed on the spot as humorous commentary on local history and people, and others were handed down from generation to generation.

Mr. Perez, who started singing *décimas* in his early teens, learned the songs and singing style from his father, Serafino Perez, and other older men in the community. He had a large repertoire of *décimas*, which ranged from the fifteenth-century "Fernando", which is about a nobleman returning from the Crusades, to more recent and typical songs about fishing in the month of February in St. Bernard. Mr. Perez says, "The *décima* reinforce pride in the old ways, a love of tradition, and hope for the future." He has recorded an album called *Spanish Décimas* from St. Bernard Parish.

He was also a skilled storyteller, whether he talked about Isleños history, folk cures, or his boyhood on Delacroix Island. Mr. Perez had been widely recognized for his role in preserving and promoting his culture. He received a prestigious National Heritage Fellowship and was inducted into the Louisiana Hall of Master Folk Artists. He had performed his *décimas* at Carnegie Hall and has participated as a singer and master craftsman in the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and many other events. He was also a source for many scholars studying the Isleño language and culture. Mr. Perez died January 8, 2008.