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**NO TURISTA. HE**—Well known in his Mexico as a romantic hero of the screen, Tony Aguilar visits Los Angeles, his former home, with wife Flor and young son Pepito.

Times photo by Fitzgerald Whitney

## LA GENTE, TONY AGUILAR

# *He Serenades the Sunset*

**BY LEE GRANT**

Times Staff Writer

Antonio Aguilar is a man of Mexico—"la cultura, las canciones, la gente"—the culture, the songs, the people. He is a warm man of smiles and stories and "abrazos" (embraces) all around.

In his country Tony Aguilar is famous, as well, a romantic hero, a singing cowboy riding into the Mexican sunset in more than 100 films. His records, sentimental tales of loves past and present and "corridos" (ranchero songs), permeate the radio from Tijuana to Guadalajara. Each week on Mexico City television is the long-running Tony Aguilar Hour.

And he is almost as well known here, the face and personality familiar to people who line up around the block to see "The Death of Pancho Villa," "Peregrina" or "Emilio Zapata" at downtown movie theaters like the Million Dollar.

Tony Aguilar was in Los Angeles taking his lunch now at a downtown hotel restaurant. It was the day before his National Mexican Festival and Rodeo was to open for five performances at the Sports Arena.

He sat close to his wife, stroking her cheek, clutching her shoulder. She is Flor Silvestre, as celebrated in Mexico as her husband, a striking woman of grace and charm, an accomplished actress and singer in her own right.

They are an imposing couple, a friendly one, and moved by the "compadres" who recognize them. Luis, a waiter, Manuel, a busboy, Faviola,

the cashier, stop at the table to chat, to shake hands, to speak of their country. They call him "senor"; he insists on Tony.

Tony Aguilar is not a "turista" here. He came to Los Angeles the first time 35 years ago, a handsome boy of 16 filled with dreams but nearly penniless. His father, a poor rancher working the soil on the outskirts of Mexico City, sent young Tony out to find odd jobs.

He had begun singing then, his voice untrained but full and robust. There was no money for lessons, no money to see about dreams.

"One day in Mexico City," said Aguilar, sipping on a martini, "I saw this Deanna Durbin billboard. Next to it was another picturing a Lincoln automobile. I wanted then to be as famous as she was and to drive a car like that one."

He scrimped and saved and finally his father sent him to Los Angeles by train, alone. He slept and ate where he could.

"There was this restaurant I remember on Hollywood and Highland," he said. "They advertised in the window a plate of spaghetti for 25 cents. I couldn't afford it. I was going hungry then for days." Later he would return to that restaurant and buy spaghetti for everyone in the house.

Eventually he settled in with a voice teacher in Hollywood, working as the man's valet and

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# Tony Aguilar Serenades the Sunset

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chauffeur, "shining his shoes, keeping house. The pay was \$15 a month plus room and board." One of the man's pupils was Deanna Durbin.

Aguilar would often tag along to Hollywood Bowl concerts, meeting artists like Toscanini.

He also met director John Ford who told him a film was being cast with John Garfield and there was a role for a young Mexican who could sing.

"They brought me into the studio," said Aguilar, "I heard them talking about how I was a wonderful, beautiful, good-looking boy. Ford said to me, 'Now go ahead and sing.' I picked up the guitar, looked at him and froze. Nothing came out.

"Ford said, 'Go home, kid, become famous in Mexico, then come back.'"

Still a teen-ager, still with dreams, Aguilar returned to Mexico City and began to study. "I was learning to be an opera singer," he said, "but I was always a cowboy at heart."

He studied opera 14 years, progressing to a debut performance at Mexico City's prestigious Palace of Fine Arts. However, a friend convinced him to become a radio singer, that fame and money was not in the classics.

And there were movies, his classic features, his ability as a "charro" (cowboy) attracting agents and producers.

At first he played nonsinging supporting roles alongside major Mexican movie stars like Pedro Infante, Sylvia Pinal, Marga Lopez and Maria Felix.

Then quickly the starring roles featuring the ranchero songs "that were in my heart." He made a film called "Mi Papa Tuvo la Culpa" ("My Father Was to Blame"), the catalyst to a long and prosperous career.

Tony Aguilar has taken John Ford's advice. He returns to the United States often. The show tours here annually. Last year there was a visit to a very special place, the Hollywood Bowl. Aguilar shared the stage with Frank Sinatra, Dionne Warwick, Tony Martin and others in a benefit concert.

He brings with him the music of Mexico.

"We sing when we are sad," said Aguilar, "when we are happy. We sing by nature. Everyone is a singer. If a Mexican flies nonstop to Paris he writes a song. We sing about love. To a Mexican his woman is the most important, his 'amor,' nothing else really matters. Love first, business later."

Aguilar turns to his wife, caressing her hand: "If I'm angry at her I get a mariachi band and sing at the window. The day we Mexicans lose our need to sing, we lose part of our hearts.

"We are a passionate people. It is the blood in us, the Indian blood, and our songs, food and dances. We let ourselves go."

The National Mexican Festival and Rodeo includes Aguilar's exhibitions as an equestrian. On his 30,000-acre ranch in Zacatecas he raises Lipizzaners, Andalusians, Appaloosas and Paso Finos.

"My father was a great horseman," he said. "I learned well the importance of being more than able to ride. I know about horses. I teach them and learn from them. I bring out their best. Horses don't speak but they feel pain and love."

After the United States tour Aguilar may take the 75-member troupe to Israel. He has been invited there. "They are a passionate people as well," he said. "I am attracted to them." In Mexico City Aguilar often sings in the synagogues of friends.

"I promised myself once," he said, "that if I ever made it big I would come back to the United States and help instill pride in the Mexican-American. I would say to them and to others: Look at this heritage. This is Mexican."