

MUSICAL CHRONICLES CORRIDOS RECOUNT HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS' STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS EVERYDAY LIFE PUT TO MUSIC IN BALLADS BY LOCAL GROUPS

San Jose Mercury News (California)

May 1, 1995 Monday MORNING FINAL EDITION

Copyright 1995 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

Section: FRONT; Pg. 1A

Length: 1396 words

Byline: EDWIN GARCIA, Mercury News Staff Writer

Body

A few days after 29-year-old Jose "el mono" Torres was gunned down in East Palo Alto, his mariachi buddies mourned his death -- they wrote a song about it.

When a well-known Mexican songwriter in San Jose heard of an international feud between two families, in Redwood City and in the Mexican state of Michoacan, he described the bloody rivalry in the best way he could -- he wrote a song about it, featuring rapid gunfire between huffs of an accordion.

The recordings haven't become hits on Spanish-language radio, here or in Mexico. But that's not unusual or discouraging for the artists when their music is based on Mexican corridos -- folkloric ballads that narrate everyday stories for everyday people. Derived from the name of a popular 18th-century ballad in Spain, corridos were exported to Mexico, where they carried news from village to village, playing a vital role in the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Nowadays, the story-telling tradition continues to thrive even on the Peninsula and in the South Bay, where groups perform songs about local happenings.

Current events

These ballads are usually written about current events that affect Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics here or in their homeland. Popular themes, played to a catchy oom-pah-pah beat, include tragedies, love affairs, miracles, narcotics, horses and immigration.

Immigration has been a mainstay, chronicling the struggles of newcomers crossing the border and looking for work. Often, they condemn exploitation by those who smuggle them and discrimination by those who hire them.

"It relates a story, and the story could be anything," said famed Chicano musician Lalo Guerrero, 78, who wrote his first corrido in 1957, a tribute to legendary Mexican singer Pedro Infante. Guerrero, who will perform in Cinco de Mayo festivities in San Jose Sunday, also wrote songs used in "Zoot Suit," a musical and a 1981 film.

While schools and books present the official view of history, said Guillermo Hernandez, a corridos scholar at UCLA, "corridos present the folk view of history."

Sometimes the songs are about famous figures, even those not really loved by the people, such as the corrido about Gov. Pete Wilson and Proposition 187. They're also written about popular people, dead or alive, such as slain Mexican presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, or slain Tejano singer Selena. Corridos also feature people

MUSICAL CHRONICLES CORRIDOS RECOUNT HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS' STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS EVERYDAY LIFE PUT TO MUSIC IN BALLADS BY LOCAL GROUPS

known only to their friends and family, such as Torres, the East Palo Alto slaying victim who is better known in death than in life because of the song.

"It's almost like a tribute -- if a corrido is written about you, that's big time," said Dora Zamora, public affairs director at Spanish-language KLOK-AM radio in San Jose, which airs a weekly program on corridos.

The death of el mono

"El Corrido del Mono," written five years ago, has been recorded by a group in Mexico and earlier this month by Redwood City mariachis, Los Alegres de Tierra Caliente de Michoacan.

The story goes like this: On a 17th of March, death was in East Palo Alto. Torres was wounded by a bullet but still managed to whip out his gun and shoot the other guy. Both perished, though Torres died satisfied, wrote Uriel Gonzalez, of East Palo Alto, to the background of a harp and violins.

The song is often heard in North Fair Oaks, the unincorporated pocket between Redwood City and Atherton that is home to many from the rural Mexican state of Michoacan.

Every night, musicians lugging bulky instruments stroll bar-to-bar down Middlefield Road in North Fair Oaks, offering their songs for 10 bucks a pop. They play traditional ballads inspired by the Mexican Revolution. They also keep up with a growing demand for trendy hits, such as corridos of violent deaths and illegal drugs.

"We have to try to learn them daily. It's a necessity," said Manuel Simon Barajas, who plays a 12-string guitar that has 10 strings. His partner, David Mandujano, squeezes a small accordion, and both specialize in norteno music, much of which includes corridos.

Down the street, at The Mug, a group of loud men request "El Corrido de la Gallina" (The ballad of the chicken), from Mariachi Los Monarcas, a seven-man band that opens each gig with loud trumpets.

The songs bring a smile to the face of Francisco Javier Rodriguez Mendoza, 22, sipping Bud Light at the back of the bar. "The way they are playing here -- that's how it is over there," said Rodriguez Mendoza, a native of Michoacan.

Famous feud

He knows corridos. Several have been written about the Mendoza side of his family, he said. Those are the same Mendozas who battle the Ramoses in a fatal feud that boomerangs between the United States and Mexico.

Enrique Franco, who for years was chief lyricist for the Grammy-winning San Jose-based group, Los Tigres del Norte, wrote and sang a ballad about the feud last year. He got the idea from a Mexican tabloid newspaper.

In his "Vendetta Michoacana," Franco begins on a Michoacan ranch, with a fight that nobody wants to remember. "The federal courts, jurisdiction Michoacan, have wanted to accuse the Ramoses and Mendozas. They (the families) want to monopolize the drug contraband," he wrote.

Franco, of San Jose, will never forget the first time he performed the song in Redwood City, where many Mendozas and Ramoses live. He was on stage at the Flamingo club when, for reasons unknown at the time, chairs began to fly across the room as he sang "Vendetta Michoacana." "All of a sudden I stopped, and we all ran out from there," Franco said.

He later learned the audience was sympathetic to friends or relatives of both families. Franco continues to perform the popular song -- in San Jose, Morgan Hill, Oakland, Los Angeles and San Diego. Anywhere but the Flamingo.

Corridos have come a long way since they focused on subjects such as national heroes, crop failures and winning race horses.

MUSICAL CHRONICLES CORRIDOS RECOUNT HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS' STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS EVERYDAY LIFE PUT TO MUSIC IN BALLADS BY LOCAL GROUPS

In the 1960s, story-songs by Guerrero, the Chicano writer, chronicled segments of history that Hispanics will probably remember: the Chicano civil rights marches and riots in East Los Angeles, the rise of United Farm Workers Union leader Cesar Chavez and the death of Robert Kennedy.

In the 1990s, young corrido fans are big on songs about drugs and blood, which Franco says "unfortunately" reflect the times.

"The corrido keeps evolving as new themes and new problems are emerging," said Hernandez, the UCLA professor, who is writing a book on the ballads. "I think there are going to be many years ahead for the corrido."

'VENDETTA MICHOACANA,' WRITTEN AND SUNG BY ENRIQUE FRANCO OF SAN JOSE:

Se ha declarado la guerra, se quieren exterminar

A los hombres o mujeres les da por igual matar.

La gente vende sus tierras nadie se quiere quedar.

The war has been declared, they want to exterminate each other.

Men or women are equally likely to kill.

The people sell their lands, nobody wants to stay.

La vendetta Michoacana ya se hizo internacional.

De Redwood City a Tijuana se han matado por igual.

The vendetta Michoacana has gone international.

From Redwood City to Tijuana they've killed for the same reasons.

'El Corrido del Mono,' by Los Alegres de Tierra Caliente de Michoacan, a Redwood City-based group. Words by Uriel Gonzalez of East Palo Alto:

Voy a cantar un corrido, pero al cantar casi lloro.

Senores, es el corrido de Jose Torres, el mono.

Un 17 de marzo, como se me ha de olvidar

La muerte andaba en (East) Palo Alto, se lo venia a llevar.

Le madrugaron al mono, y eso no se ha de dudar

El mono muy mal herido, casi para agonizar.

Logro sacar su pistola y al otro pudo matar.

I'm going to sing a corrido, but when I sing I almost cry.

Senores, it's the corrido of Jose Torres, el mono.

A 17th of March, how can I ever forget,

Death was in (East) Palo Alto, it came to take him away.

They ambushed el mono, there can be no doubt about it.

MUSICAL CHRONICLES CORRIDOS RECOUNT HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS' STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS EVERYDAY LIFE PUT TO MUSIC IN BALLADS BY LOCAL GROUPS

El mono was critically wounded, nearly at death's door,
(Yet) he managed to draw his pistol and kill the other guy.
El mono era un buen amigo, que nadie podra olvidar.
El se paseaba con todos, fue amigo a carta cabal.
Pidiendo siempre a mariachi 'La tragedia de vernal.'
El mono was a good friend, whom no one can ever forget.
He got along with everyone, he was a friend in every respect.
Always asking the mariachi for (his favorite song).

Notes

Additional information attached to the end of this article

Graphic

Photos (2);

PHOTO: TOM VAN DYKE -- MERCURY NEWS

Mariachi musicians count their tips after a night's work at The Mug in North Fair Oaks.

950501 FR 12A; color

PHOTO: TOM VAN DYKE --

MERCURY NEWS

Bar patron Alex Rivera, left, joins Los Incorrigenbles del Norte guitarist Ismael Ochoa at El Tenampa, in Redwood City.

950501 FR 1A 1; color PHOTO: TOM VAN DYKE --

MERCURY NEWS

After

working the bars and streets, Manuel Simon Barajas, left, and David Mandujano relax on a North Fair Oaks corner.

950501 FR 1A PF; color

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **MUSIC** (90%); SONG WRITING (90%); **HISPANIC** AMERICANS (89%); SINGERS & MUSICIANS (89%); SHOOTINGS (78%); IMMIGRATION (77%); FAMILY (76%); FOLKLORE (74%); CINCO DE MAYO (72%); SMUGGLING (68%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (66%); POLITICAL CANDIDATES (50%)

MUSICAL CHRONICLES CORRIDOS RECOUNT HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS' STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS
EVERYDAY LIFE PUT TO MUSIC IN BALLADS BY LOCAL GROUPS

Company: SOUTH BAY BMW (55%)

Industry: SINGERS & MUSICIANS (89%); ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (77%)

Geographic: SAN JOSE, CA, USA (90%); SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (58%); MEXICO (96%);
UNITED STATES (79%); SPAIN (57%)

Load-Date: October 24, 2002

End of Document