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## **Contrabando Y Corrupcion: The Rise in Popularity of Narcocorridos**

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CHAPTER  
TWELVE



*Louis M. Holscher*  
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*Contrabando Y Corrupcion:*  
*The Rise in Popularity of*  
*Narcocorridos*

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and analyzes a category of recent popular songs (performed in Spanish) that are regularly heard throughout Mexico and in much of the United States, particularly the Southwest. These songs, known as *corridos* (ballads), are factually based and deal with a variety of cultural themes important to Mexicans and Chicanos. Those *corridos* that deal with themes and issues involving drugs, particularly trafficking, have come to be commonly known as *narcocorridos* (narcotics ballads). These story-telling songs portray, and some critics argue glorify, the culture of drug smuggling and the exploits of drug traffickers and related criminals.

Included in this article is a brief historical overview of *corridos*, Mexican and Chicano popular songs that describe and comment on current political and social events, and depict the exploits of both famous and infamous individuals. A number of *narcocorridos* are presented and discussed as examples of currently (or recently) popular songs that deal with drugs and related topics such as drug lords and smuggling. The paper concludes with a discussion of the societal response (both favorable and unfavorable) to *narcocorridos*, and the songs' potential impact on young people and society in general.

#### THE CORRIDO TRADITION

Critics and the media have labeled recent Mexican and Chicano (Mexican American) songs dealing with drugs "narcocorridos" (narcotics-ballads). This type of music, both in terms of lyrical content and music, comes out of the *corrido* (ballad) tradition, which has been popular in Mexico and the Southwestern United States since the early to mid-19th century (Roberts, 1999; Simmons, 1951). The Mexican civil war (1846-48), for example, is well preserved in *corrido* texts (Roberts, 1999). Although they originated in central Mexico and have long been popular throughout all of Mexico and the American Southwest, *corridos* are a principal variant of norteña music and one of the main musical fares in northern Mexico. The *corrido* genre is generally based on a rather declamatory melody and the last line of each verse is stretched distinctively by their singers. *Corridos* can be in polka, waltz, or march time; conventionally, a 2/4 time is used for upbeat topics and waltz time for all others (Roberts, 1999). They are often sung in duet with one voice slightly dominating, often in parallel thirds and sixths - the most basic Spanish-derived harmonic approach. In terms of music, *corridos* are usually "sing-songy" and repetitive, with a relatively simple up-and-down cadence, with an accordion, guitar, and other instruments accompanying a vocalist. This paper broadly defines the term "*corrido*," and examines recent compositions in this genre that express views or comment upon matters related to drugs and crime.

During the past 20 years, *corridos* greatly gained in popularity throughout Mexico and the U.S., selling particularly well in markets throughout the Southwest and northern Mexico. *Corridos*, however, have a long history. In the 1500s their likely ancestors were the Andalusian romantic verses (known as *romances*) brought to Mexico by Spanish conquerors (Herrera-Sobek, 1998). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, they served as a popular form of news bulletin by traveling musicians (*trovadores*). Assassinations, revolutions, natural disasters, accidents, elections, immigration, strikes, family feuds, folk heroes and shoot-outs between bandits and the police were all popular themes for *corridos*. In fact, almost any event that touches the public sentiment can serve as inspiration for a *corrido* (Griffith and Fernández, 1988). *Corridos* are deeply ingrained in Mexican and Chicano culture, and are a standard form of marking major events in both public and daily life. They have covered events ranging from the coming of the railroads to Sputnik, from romantic entanglements to bank robberies. The facets of Mexican life that can be studied through the *corrido* are practically unlimited, and these ballads can be used as historical documents of important aspects of modern Mexican and Chicano life, as well as of the daily trials and tribulations of the *pueblo* (the popular or common classes). There are *corridos* about natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, flood, etc.), traffic accidents, wars (e.g., the U.S.-Mexico War, WW II, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War) and joyous events like weddings and winning the lottery (Fernández and Officer, 1989). President John F. Kennedy's assassination is documented in over fifteen *corridos* (Dickey, 1978), for example, and the athletic achievements of Fernando Valenzuela, the ace pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers of the 1980s, can also be found in several ballads, e.g., Lalo Guerrero's "Olé Fernando" and "Fernando, El Toro" (Fernando, The Bull). Although *corridos* are essentially ballads that tell a story, they often contain beliefs, values, attitudes and commentary on many topics, much like the editorial page of the modern newspaper (Griffith and Fernández, 1988). Simmons (1951), for example, uses *corridos* to trace agrarian, political, and religious reform, as well as relations with foreigners and foreign nations in 20th century Mexico. He also discusses the treatment of Mexican leaders, and the Mexican national personality through this genre.

*Corridos* on specifically Chicano themes – often on political and cultural clashes – have been sung since the 19th century, and still continue to be composed. The earliest known complete U.S. *corrido*, "El *Corrido* de Kiansas" (Kansas), describes the cattle drives from Texas to Kansas in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and was sung in Brownsville by 1870 (Roberts, 1999). "El *Condenado a Muerte*" (The One Condemned to Death) was discovered in New Mexico and laments the author's coming execution for an unnamed crime, and actually gives an exact date, Wednesday, July 20, 1832 (Roberts, 1999). Possibly the earliest Texas *corrido* is "*Corrido* de Leandro Rivera," which dates from 1841. Paredes (1958) labeled the period from 1836 to the late 1930s the "*corrido* century" on the U.S.-Mexico border (although given the popularity of *corridos* in this region during the past 20 years, a rival "*corrido* century" may be in the making). An early Texas *corrido* hero was Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, who in 1859 shot a Brownsville, Texas, city marshal who had been mistreating his mother's servant, and with his followers briefly occupied the town before fleeing across the border. The most famous *corrido* from that period was about Gregorio Cortéz, whose exploits and problems resulting from the shooting of a Texas Ranger have also been documented in a recent popular film, "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortéz," starring James Edward Olmos. Numerous *corridos* are available about the late César Chávez, the founder and long-time leader of the farm workers' movement. One of the first ballads on César Chávez was by Felipe Cantú (Burciaga, 1991), one of the original actors in El Teatro Campesino (The Campestral Theatre), a highly popular theatre that performed plays with social and political themes of interest to farm workers and other laborers. There is even a 1995 *corrido* mourning the death of Selena, the popular Tejana star who had recently been murdered by the president of her fan club.

*Corridos* are often intensely serious, and they have always mirrored social and political concerns. They are repositories of both myth and history for a people not often served by mainstream newspapers and other media. A few such examples are: "*Los Rinches de Texas*" (The Texas Rangers) which tells the story of how Texas Rangers brutally beat poor farm workers. This song is featured in the film "Chulas Fronteras"

(Beautiful Borders) and describes an incident during a strike of melon-pickers in Star County, Texas, in June 1967; the "*Corrido de Juan Reyna*" (The Ballad of Juan Reyna) recounts his conviction for manslaughter (for killing a police officer while allegedly being beaten up in a squad car) and sentence to prison; a sequel tells of Reyna's apparent suicide in jail five months before his release; and "*La Tragedia de Oklahoma*" (The Tragedy in Oklahoma) deals with a famous case in which two students from Mexico, one of whom was related to the president, were shot by deputies near Ardmore, Oklahoma. One overt protest song is "*El Deportado*" (The Deportee) which bluntly describes Anglos as very evil, and who treat Mexicans without pity.

A relatively recent song, "*El Corrido de César Chávez*" (The Ballad of César Chávez) by *Los Pingüinos del Norte* (The Penguins of the North), reflects the rise of Chicano political and ethnic consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s. The death of eighteen undocumented workers who died of heat asphyxiation while locked in a boxcar was widely reported in the mainstream press, but was also recorded in a corrido, "*El Vagon de la Muerte*" (The Boxcar of Death). Hence, *corridos* have acted as not only a reflection of political and social consciousness but also as a stimulus to it.

Simmons (1951) is careful to point out that the views and events described in *corridos* are not always entirely correct (but no means of popular expression is always fully accurate); however, *corridos* are generally quite accurate in documenting the names, dates and locations of specific events. They also provide an important point of view on events and people from the composer's perspective and others who may share his point of view. Much of *corrido* music is working class in origin, and provides an analysis of events and people from the perspective of "*el pueblo*" (the common folk); thus, although *corridos* may not always present a complete picture, they do present views that may not reflect elite or even middle-class interests. The values espoused are most often ones of bravery, loyalty to friends, machismo, independence, disrespect for the law (but respect for a Higher Law) and a love of justice for the common man. Women are either generally not

mentioned, or are the subject of strong emotions of love, anger, scorn, etc. There are a few notable *corridos*, however, that favorably refer to the love and good advice of mothers. There are literally thousands of *corridos*, and this article only touches on one small aspect of popular and representative tunes that deal with drugs. The article analyzes and comments on the extent to which these songs provide an expression of how a sizeable segment of the working class population has viewed drugs and drug smugglers during the past thirty or so years. In that respect, it may provide a view of public/popular opinion not otherwise found in the media or other sources – similar to the role of rap music in the U.S. The popularity of these *corridos* is one indication that many people, particularly young people, have not accepted the official anti-drug message of the Mexican and United States governments.

#### DRUG TRAFFICKING AND MEXICAN MUSIC

In 1972 Los Tigres del Norte (The Tigers of the North) released "*Contrabando y Traición*" (Contraband and Betrayal), at a time when drug use had increased dramatically in less than a decade, and Mexican immigrants were seeing drug trafficking daily as they crossed the border. The song, about drug runners, was a huge hit, and was a critical factor in Los Tigres becoming major stars in Spanish-language pop music. Their music continues to be very popular at Mexican and Chicano *fiestas* and dances. Since 1972, Los Tigres, whose members are originally from Mexico, but who have made the San José, California, area their home since the late 1960s, have made 30 records and 14 movies, won a Grammy, and have changed Mexican/Chicano pop music at least twice - first with songs about drug smuggling and more recently with immigration songs (Quinones, 1997). Still largely unknown outside the Chicano community, they are revered within the Mexican-immigrant and Chicano communities in the United States and among Mexicans throughout Mexico. Los Tigres has also modernized the *corrido*, infusing their music with cumbias, rock rhythms, and sound effects of machine guns and sirens. With their popularity they have

broadened the appeal of the accordion-based music of Northern Mexico (*música norteña*). Over time, they have added a full drum set and an electric bass, and thus modernized *norteño* music. Besides their "drug" songs, common themes in their music include machismo, desires and the values and beliefs that are the essence of the Mexican and Chicano working class such as dignity, respect, family, and Christianity.

"*Contrabando y Traición*" became a *norteño* classic and has been recorded by many other bands, plus it was the title of a popular commercial film. (In the U.S., popular books, both fiction and non-fiction, frequently serve to inspire feature films, *corridos* have often done the same in Mexico.) The two main characters of "*Contrabando y Tración*," Emilio Varela and Camelia, "La Tejana" (The Texan), are now part of Chicano folklore. This corrido was also the first hit song about drug smuggling, and thus the first *narcocorrido*. The song "*El Corrido de Camelia 'La Texana'*" (The Ballad of Camelia "The Texan") spawned a number of movies, including one titled *Mataron a Camelia La Texana* (They Killed Camelia, "The Texan," 1976) and *Ya Encontraron a Camelia* (They Found Camelia, 1979) (Herrera-Sobek, 1998). Los Tigres followed "*Contrabando y Traición*" with "*La Banda del Carro Rojo*" (The Red Car Gang) also a corrido about drug smuggling. These tunes essentially sparked a trend that is currently undergoing immense popularity in Mexican music. In a sense, the *narcocorrido* is an update, both in terms of music and theme of the traditional *corrido*, and emphasizes drug smugglers, shoot-outs between drug gangs and the police, corruption, and betrayal. Most *norteño* bands today play a selection of *narcocorridos*, and many bands play almost nothing else. Like gangster rap in the U.S., *corridos* recount violence and crime and have achieved immense popularity without the benefit of radio airplay in many areas. Even in areas where *narcocorridos* are played regularly, disc jockeys often will warn listeners about language and content when such corridos are particularly graphic.

Criticism of *narcocorridos* has come from leaders within the Catholic Church, business leaders, and from at least one political party, the

conservative National Action Party (PAN) in Mexico, the party of Mexico's current President. They have been labeled as part of a "culture of death" for emphasizing drugs and murder. Newsweek (April 23, 2001) notes that, "Critics on both sides of the border are attacking Mexican pop songs that glorify drugs. *Los Tucanes de Tijuana* and *Los Tigres del Norte*, in particular, are targets for their *narcocorridos*... Tijuana's city council and a national business coalition are urging stations to stop playing these songs." Jorge Hernández of Los Tigres, like many rap artists, responds that, "The only thing that we do is sing about what happens every day. We're interpreters, then the public decides what songs they like" (Quinones, 1997).

Since the early 1970s, the Chicano community and Mexican working class have decided they like *narcocorridos*. Los Tigres regularly includes two or three on each album. In 1989, they released "*Corridos Prohibidos*" (Prohibited or Banned Corridos), an entire album about drug smuggling. Numerous other less well known singers and bands have followed suit with their own *narcocorridos* CDs and cassettes which can be purchased in almost any store that sells music, from small specialized music shops that cater to Mexicans and Chicanos to large chain department stores such as Target and K-Mart. This album was very controversial in both the U.S. and Mexico, and was reported to be very popular among the drug smugglers themselves. Los Tigres, however, is not really a "narcoband;" it is a *norteño* band that plays all varieties of *norteño* music, including *corridos* dealing with various themes, one of these themes is drug trafficking. Los Tigres, for example, won a Grammy for "America," a rock tune that preaches the universal brotherhood of Latinos. Also, unlike younger bands today, Los Tigres rarely mention the names of real drug smugglers, are not photographed with handguns or assault rifles, and usually refer to marijuana and cocaine as *hierba mala* (bad weed) and *coca*. In addition, Los Tigres have achieved a more respectable cultural claim with their songs about the immigration experience; for example, "*Vivan Los Mojados*" (Long Live the Wetbacks) and "*El Otro Mexico*" (The Other Mexico) which deals with the undying desire of Mexican immigrants to return home.

The title song of *Jefe de Jefes* (Boss of Bosses or Chief of Chiefs), which has a number of pictures in the CD booklet of the members of Los Tigres at Alcatraz, was released in the summer of 1997 and is about a fictional drug kingpin. The album features several *narcocorridos*, including one about drug lord Hector "El Güero" Palma, who was arrested in 1996 after a plane crash. "El Prisionero" (The Prisoner) is about recent political assassinations in Mexico. One song on *Jefe de Jefes*, "Ni Aquí Ni Allá" (Neither Here nor There), captures the feelings of many Mexican immigrants today. It is a pessimistic tune that captures the anti-immigrant sentiments in the U.S. and the corruption, scandals, and economic crisis in Mexico. The song concludes that immigrants are unlikely to receive justice or be able to improve economically in either country. In a previous song, "La Jaula de Oro" (The Golden Cage), an immigrant who years earlier had outwitted *La Migra* (the Border Patrol) does not feel at home in the country he worked so hard to enter. Even worse, he notes, his children now speak English and reject his *Mexicanidad*, his "Mexicaness." And while the protagonist would love to return to Mexico, he cannot leave his house and job for fear of being apprehended and deported because he needs the job in the U.S. in order to provide for his family. Thus, Jorge Hernández, notes that the U.S. is like a "cage made of gold" – immigrants may live well and be able to afford some nice things, but it is not home, it is not as relaxing and peaceful as living in Mexico. Also, the family is no longer as important and one is certainly not free to move about, particularly if one is an undocumented immigrant; although the bird/immigrant lives in a "golden cage," it is a cage nonetheless (Quinones, 1997).

Perhaps one explanation for why *narco* and immigration *corridos* are so popular is because they capture the essential reasons as to why so many Mexican immigrants come to the U.S. Namely, the lack of employment and economic opportunity in Mexico and the availability of work in the U.S., as well as because these songs document and help people cope with the discrimination and lack of equality experienced in the U.S., for example, as expressed in "Ni Aquí Ni Allá." Undoubtedly, these are some

of the critical factors (employment and income) as well that make the drug trade lucrative for many young working class Mexican men. As Cortese notes, “The Mexican-U.S. border is the only place where one can leap from the First World to the Third World in five minutes” (Cortese, 1990).

The 1990s experienced a resurgence of the *corrido*'s popularity. At the request of listening audiences, Spanish-language radio stations throughout the Southwest and Mexico offered daily hour-long *corrido* programs (in some cases the “*corrido* hour” was offered twice daily, usually during early morning and late evening). Without a doubt, during the 1990s the single favorite theme of *corridos* became drug trafficking. When Mario Quintero, the lead singer of the popular group Los Tucanes de Tijuana, takes the stage he often sings about drug lords, cocaine shipments and shoot-outs. They have one of the hottest bands in Northern Mexico and are equally popular with Chicanos in the United States. One of their recent two-CD release, *Tucanes de Plata*, has sold a million copies in the U.S. and over 2 million copies worldwide. They have been criticized for glorifying the drug trade and drug lords, and the question has been raised whether the message of Los Tucanes and dozens of other bands and *corrido* singers may be changing the values of a generation of young Mexicanos and Chicanos (Collier, 1997). One of their popular new songs is called “*La Piñata*” (The Piñata) and tells of a drug lord's party that included a *piñata* full of bags of cocaine. Two other songs from their new CD are “El Primo” (The Cousin) which adopts the voice of a narcotics boss and “The Little Colombian Rock” which refers to cocaine. While it is an open question whether these tunes and others like them actually change beliefs and behavior, they regularly describe the potential riches and pitfalls of the drug trade. Often these *corridos* speak of betrayals, murders and assassinations among those involved in drug trafficking, and the listener could easily conclude that this is a highly dangerous enterprise, one not worth entering. Yet, this was not the common interpretation during the 1990s. Drug trafficking, while highly dangerous, is a most lucrative business. A report issued by the United Nations (1997) documents that “drug trafficking has grown to a \$400

billion-a-year enterprise.” The same report notes that worldwide, “illegal drugs are reported as a bigger business than all exports of automobiles and about equal to the international textile trade.” Drug traffickers “are successful 85-90% of the time” (Cortese, 1990).

Besides Los Tucanes and Los Tigres del Norte, other known (and many relatively obscure) groups like Los Huracanes and Los Dinamicos del Norte have also had success with *narcocorridos*. Popular titles include: "Contraband of Juárez," "Terrible AK-47," "Partners of the Mafia," "The Cellular Phone," and "Sacred Cargo." Like rap music in the U.S., *narcocorridos* have been widely criticized in Mexico as having a negative influence on young people and a negative impact on society in general. Rene Villanueva, a prominent music historian and a member of Los Folkloristas (a band that has played *corridos* and other traditional regional Mexican music since the 1960s) calls *narcocorridos* a "horrible perversion of Mexican culture", and "a sign of how the power of money amid poverty has diverted people's interest to the most vulgar aspects of our society" (Collier, 1997). In two northwest Mexican states, Chihuahua and Sinaloa, government officials have banned *narcocorridos* from the radio and television, and many other individual stations have done the same. (Of course, banning them has not made them disappear or any less popular.) A common complaint is that they glorify criminal behavior and should be banned everywhere. Interestingly, it is commonly believed/known that these two states are home to numerous individuals involved in the drug trade. There is a shrine in Culiacán, the capital of the state of Sinaloa, dedicated to a Jesús Malverde where traffickers go (literally at all hours of the day and night) to pray for protection during drug trips and to thank him when such trips have been successful. It is common knowledge that Malverde has come to be known as “the saint of the drug traffickers.” There are numerous *corridos*, incidentally, about Malverde and some of these very specifically refer to drug trafficking.

There have not been calls for similar actions in California, Arizona or Texas, for example, although *narcocorridos* remain very popular on

Spanish-language stations in these states. Vicente Romero, program director of KRAY-FM in Salinas plays *rancheras* and other popular forms of Mexican music, but he also plays *narcocorridos*, commenting that, "Maybe Los Tucanes and the other *narcocorridos* are a bad influence, but we have to play them because everybody asks for them, and no one complains" (Collier, 1997). It may be that they arouse less concern than rap music because they have a much softer touch musically, and lack the aggressiveness and harder edge of many rap tunes. Plus, *narcocorridos* are part of the long and extensive *corrido* musical and cultural tradition and are almost always sung in Spanish, and thus rarely heard outside the Chicano and Mexican immigrant communities. Additionally, *narcocorridos* are performed by individuals and groups who look "normal," that is, they dress in clothes normal to the *noteño* music tradition, unlike rappers who project a distinct "look" (e.g., tattoos, baggy clothes, and lots of large jewelry). *Narcocorridos*, at times, almost seem to make drugs and drug trafficking a positive, lucrative, and charming experience. While they share drug and crime themes with gangster rap, they are still very popular with a large segment of the Spanish-speaking population.

Quintero, the lead singer and guitarist from Los Tucanes, responds to critics in much the same way as many rap artists, that they are simply reporting on a popular aspect of contemporary life, and that by prohibiting drugs the government has actually contributed to their popularity and to the development of a multi-billion dollar underground business. One of the most controversial aspects of Los Tucanes' songs is that some of their lyrics read as if they might have been written for the drug lords and gangs themselves. For example, the group's song about "El Güero" (Whitey) Palma, a Sinaloa drug lord now serving time in Mexico's high-security Almoloya prison, calls him "a respectable gentlemen" and concludes in a warning to the police: "Don't go over the line, because the king isn't dead...Don't sleep soundly. The orders are the same, and will be carried out to the letter. Even your pillow could explode on you." Quintero argues that their songs are about what they have seen or what people tell us. "La

*Piñata*" is about a real, he claims, drug lord's cocaine party that someone told him about. Whether *corridos* are always completely accurate or not is somewhat irrelevant. What is accurate, however, is that illegal drugs have been part of American popular culture since the 1960s and drug smuggling, drug wars, and other activities endemic to the drug trade and drug use have touched the lives of most Americans, including Chicanos and *Mexicanos*. Given the role of the *corrido* in Chicano and Mexican cultures, its role in capturing and commenting on the daily experience, particularly that which shocks, it is no accident, nor should it be surprising, that we find so many *corridos* about drug trafficking and that these *corridos* have become so popular.

#### CONCLUSION

*Narcocorridos* seem to indicate a change in heroes or if you will anti-heroes to some extent. While drug smugglers and dealers do fight the government, they rarely do it to benefit the community or the oppressed. Their popularity with young working class *Mexicanos* and Chicanos should not be surprising, however, given the poverty and inequality that continues to be a common phenomenon in both countries. As Cortese (1990) notes, "Profit and poverty explain why Mexico has become the source of large quantities of illicit drugs... They [poor Mexicans] literally have nothing to lose and much to gain by cultivating or trafficking in illicit drugs."



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