

Far From Home, Mexicans Sing Age-Old

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Correction Appended

NAMPA, Idaho — Watching television coverage of [immigration](#) marches, Jose F. Garcia got mad. He got frustrated. He got his button accordion.

In short order, Mr. Garcia squeezed out the beginnings of a corrido, a kind of Mexican folk ballad that tells a story, often with a moral, and sang out the lyrics that came to him.

Now they are putting up barriers in front of us so we don't return;
but that is not going to block us from crossing into the United States,
We leap them like deer, we go under them like moles.

Mr. Garcia, accompanied by his young son Benjamin on a snare drum, recently belted out the song, "Latinos Unidos," in an onion field for the benefit of researchers from the Western Folklife Center, a nonprofit cultural organization in Elko, Nev., that has begun a project to document Mexican influences and folklore in the ranching West.

Corridos have long telegraphed the melancholy of Mexico's northern frontier. Heroes die. Lovers are crossed. And, in the controversial narco-corrido form, drug dealers are celebrated.

But as migrants moved north, modern corridos have also been inspired by everyday occurrences and current events, with some written about the Kennedys, crops, floods and truck stops.

Mr. Garcia has recorded a corrido about the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, "Tragedia en Nueva York," complete with a jet sound whining through the guitars, horns and accordion.

It was Sept. 11 when the world woke up
in the year 2001 when it was reported
that in the twin towers two airplanes crashed

(In Spanish, the lyrics rhyme.)

The Western Folklife Center intends to build an archive of such material, recording for posterity the Mexican presence far from the border and turning some of it into segments for public television and radio.

Although the project was conceived before the immigration debate intensified, Hal Cannon, the founding director of the center and its popular offshoot, the annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering, said it could serve as a reminder that, come what may, the Latino influence has already taken root.

“I think that’s an important song,” Mr. Cannon told his colleagues after listening to a few verses of Mr. Garcia’s corrido, which Mr. Garcia plans to perform with his band and may play as part of a corrido competition the folklife center is organizing here on July 15 month.

Through the project, Mr. Cannon said later, “Relationships will be built, understanding will be built and we will be documenting something that is quite ephemeral.”

Musicians and scholars debate what qualifies as a corrido. To purists, Mr. Garcia’s immigration song, though sung in the style of a corrido and with instruments common to the form, does not make the cut.

“I believe somebody has to die,” said Juan Dies, an ethnomusicologist who is based in Chicago and is working with the center on the project. “But some people don’t feel that way.”

“The community defines what a corrido is, not a scholar from Chicago,” added Mr. Dies, who specializes in Mexican music. “It is, basically, a musical news story.”

Mr. Garcia's repertory, apart from immigration and terrorism, includes songs of desperate lovers and other more traditional corrido themes, which he and other musicians have found the crowds here, ever nostalgic, tend to favor.

"To me, a corrido is a song with a message," said Mr. Garcia, who recently opened a dance club but is hoping for a big break some day for his band. "I don't like the ones about drug traffickers that are popular on the radio and that the young kids these days like. But as long as it is telling a story with a message to me it is a corrido."

Some of the older corridos here speak of the beauty of the valley — one, a romantic ballad called "Nampa," extols the virtues of its women and "silvery moon nights" — or bar fights long forgotten. But the longing for home, and the difficulty of going back, are more popular themes among the current crop of local musicians.

"If I write one about my friend over there the people would say, hey, who wants to hear about him?" said Gerardo Barca, a musician known by his nickname, Lalo. "People want to be transported home, to time and events there."

So Mr. Barca wrote the bittersweet "Lindos Recuerdos," or "Beautiful Memories," about the loss of his family's ranch in Michoacan to development after he left 15 years ago and his inability to ever return.

"These are just beautiful memories of times that won't come back; Since the times have changed, and where there was that little ranch now there is a city."

"Everybody here can relate to that, to that idea of wanting to go home but never really making it," he said.

Latino immigrants, primarily from Mexico and Texas, came to the Treasure Valley here in three waves. The first arrived in the 1800s to work in mines and build railroads, another came to work in agriculture

in the postwar boom of the 1940s and 1950s and a third in the past couple of decades as Boise and its suburbs have swollen over farmland.

From 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population of Idaho grew 92 percent, to 101,690, with most of that growth in the Treasure Valley.

Alfredo Paz, a local musician, laments that the younger generation prefers narco-corridos, a rough equivalent to gangsta rap and something he and his band members refuse to perform.

“We don’t want to sing about drugs or rape or anything like that,” said Mr. Paz, who does perform corridos about double-crossed lovers and his signature, “Le Quedan Plumas Al Gallo,” or “The Rooster Still Has His Feathers.” The song is about a man defeated in love but still the cock of the walk.

Mr. Garcia, who has been in the United States for more than 20 years, said he was carrying on a musical tradition handed down from his father and practiced in the small village where he grew up.

“I always wanted to be somebody so I composed music,” he said.

While watching the immigration marches that day, Mr. Garcia said he felt compelled to put “our story” to music, scratching out the words over several weeks, right up to the day the folklife center researchers came calling.

“I feel we need to write out stories and this was a big part of our story here,” he said. “Corridos used to be like newspapers. Well, maybe, they still should be.”

Correction: July 7, 2007

A picture caption yesterday with an article about a project documenting Mexican influences and folklore in the ranching West referred incorrectly to the musicians shown performing near Nampa, Idaho. They were performing for researchers from the Western Folklife Center, not as part of a benefit for the center.

