

Songs of Love and Murder, Silenced by Killings

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MORELIA, [Mexico](#) — Mexico's country music stars are being killed at an alarming rate — 13 in the past year and a half, three already in December — in a trend that has gone hand in hand with the surge in violence between drug gangs here.

None of the cases have been solved. All have borne the signs of Mexican underworld executions, sending a chill through the ranks of other grupero musicians, who sing to a country beat about love, violence and drugs in modern Mexico.

One of the most shocking attacks was the kidnapping of Sergio Gómez, the founder and lead singer of K-Paz de la Sierra, who was seized as he left a concert in his home state of Michoacán early on the morning of Dec. 2.

His body was found the next day dumped on a roadside outside this city, the state capital. He had been beaten, tortured with a cigarette lighter, then strangled with a plastic cord, officials said. He was 34 and had just been nominated for a Grammy Award.

“We don't understand why this happened,” his uncle, Froylán Gómez, said in an interview. “He never did anyone any harm.”

The motives for the killings remain a matter of speculation, and no evidence has been found to link them to a single killer. In some cases, the musicians appeared to have ties to organized crime figures, making them potential targets in reprisal attacks from rival gangs.

Others had composed ballads known as narcocorridos, glorifying the shadow world of drug dealers and hit men, which can offend other drug dealers and hit men. In still other cases, as the musicians' fame grew, they may have become embroiled with criminals unwittingly.

“Sometimes there is a direct relationship between the musician and the narcotics trafficker,” said Miguel Olmos, a musicologist at the College of the Northern Border in Tijuana. “But also there are a lot of passionate crimes. That is to say, the musician establishes some sort of sentimental relationship with people who are linked to this culture of violence and of narcotics trafficking, and somehow it gets out of hand. They always touch some nerve of the trafficker.”

In the case of Mr. Gómez, who was best known for his stirring love songs, prosecutors are investigating whether he had ties to organized crime. So far, however, the investigation into his abduction has been a morass of conflicting accounts, missing witnesses and loose ends unlikely to be tied up soon.

Investigators have yet to interview the two impresarios who were with Mr. Gómez when he was kidnapped, nor have they interviewed the other members of his group. “We hope we can locate all these people,” said María Elena Cornejo Chávez, the assistant attorney general of Michoacán State. “It’s very complicated for us because they all left the state.”

The killings have been particularly brutal. On Thursday, José Luis Aquino, 33, a trumpet player with Los Conde, was found beaten to death in Oaxaca State, with a plastic bag over his head and his hands and feet tied.

On Dec. 1, Zayda Peña, the raven-haired lead singer of Zayda y los Culpables, was shot in a motel room in Matamoros in Tamaulipas State. She survived the attack, but the killers followed her to the hospital and finished her off with two more bullets as she lay in bed. She was 28.

“We are in shock, because it’s a weird thing that in one week three members of the grupero wave would be killed,” José Ángel Medina, the leader of the group Patrulla 81, told reporters after the recent killings. “We are afraid because we are superexposed, and this could keep going. We don’t know who’s next.”

Entire groups have been targeted as well. Four members of Los Padrinos de la Sierra were shot and killed in Durango State on June 9. On Feb. 19, assassins with machine guns attacked the members of Tecno Banda Fugaz in the town of Puruarán, Michoacán, killing four and wounding one.

The toll in 2006 was equally grim. On Aug. 9, three members of Explosión Norteña, a group who dedicated themselves to songs about drug traffickers, were shot and seriously wounded in their offices in Tijuana, across the border from San Diego.

Nov. 25 of that year brought the assassination of the singer Valentín Elizalde, 25, along with his manager and driver, shortly after a show in the border town of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, across from McAllen, Tex. More than 60 rounds from an AK-47 were fired into their car.

A month later, Javier Morales Gómez, a member of Los Implacables del Norte, was shot to death in Huetamo, Michoacán.

All the victims played various genres of grupero, the Mexican country music distinguished by its oompah beat and maudlin lyrics, often recounting tales of unrequited love, hard luck, famous bandits or their modern equivalent, drug lords.

Some were known particularly for their narcocorridos. One of Ms. Peña’s hits, for instance, was “Tiro de Gracia,” a reference to gangland executions. Mr. Elizalde was also well known for his ballads about bandits and drug kingpins.

Mr. Gómez, of K-Paz de la Sierra, however, was different. His biggest hits were love songs like “Mi Credo” (My Creed) and “Volveré” (I Will Return.) His band played in the Durango dance style, characterized by the prominence of brass instruments and a superfast march beat. Like many other grupero combos, the band members wore identical western suits and cowboy hats.

News of his death prompted some musicians to cancel concerts in Michoacán. Others said the killings made them nervous about appearing in public.

“These assassinations have been done with a lot of cruelty and this makes us tense,” said Jorge Medina, a singer with La Arrolladora Banda, in a televised interview.

Michoacán investigators say Mr. Gómez left a stadium in Morelia after his concert at about 3:30 a.m. on Dec. 2, a Sunday. He was in the company of a driver and two music industry executives, Javier Rivera and Víctor Hugo Sánchez. They drove off in a sedan, the police said. The other seven musicians in the band and two of Mr. Gómez’s brothers followed in other cars.

A short while later, a member of the group called the federal police and reported that Mr. Gómez and the two businessmen had been abducted by armed men about three miles outside Morelia on the highway to Salamanca. The federal police informed the state police, the authorities said.

What happened next remains unclear. The state police maintain that when they arrived at the scene, federal agents told them they had interviewed the two businessmen and determined the kidnapping had been a false alarm, said Ms. Cornejo, the deputy state attorney general. A spokesman for the federal attorney’s office in Morelia, Miguel Ángel Hernández, confirmed that account.

Yet Mr. Gómez was tortured to death between 4:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Dec. 2 in an unknown place, an autopsy found. He had been beaten badly around the head and chest. His thighs and genitals had been burned with a flame. He died of strangulation.

In Ciudad Hidalgo, a small farming town nestled in a valley about 60 miles east of Morelia, people remembered Mr. Gómez with warmth. He had grown up there, the son of a local singer who never made the big time, in a modest house in a poor neighborhood. While still a teenager, he married a girl from a nearby ranch, lived in his parent’s home, fathered his first child and went to work as a cabinet maker.

The entire family moved to Chicago during the financial crisis in the mid-1990s, where Mr. Gómez worked menial jobs, fathered two more children and ran into trouble with [immigration](#) authorities. Eventually he found work as a sound technician for a band, Montéz de Durango.

In 2003, he and three musicians from that group formed K-Paz de la Sierra. His career took off. The band recorded four highly successful albums and regularly toured arenas and large concert halls in Mexico.

He also visited Ciudad Hidalgo every year and gave thousands of dollars to expand the grade school where he studied as a child. He never put on airs with his old friends, neighbors said. “He always behaved very well,” said an acquaintance, who asked not to be identified for fear of drug dealers. “He was not one to be very snobbish.”

His wife, Felicita, told reporters he seemed relaxed in the days just before his death and never mentioned any threats. “I never saw him nervous or expecting something bad,” she said.

Froylán Gómez said his nephew never sang about drug dealers or used drugs himself. “This man didn’t even smoke or drink,” he said. “We cannot understand why it happened. The whole family is demanding justice. We want to know who is the author of this crime.”