Reviews

Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas

By Elijah Wald, Harper Collins Rayo

Even longtime chart buffs were surprised when Jessie Morales, a virtually unknown 18–year–old from Los Angeles, debuted at No. 1 on *Billboard's* Top Latin Albums last June. But Morales's album was a tribute to singer/songwriter Chalino Sanchez, a legend of the California Mexican immigrant community who was murdered in 1992. Almost 10 years after Sanchez's death, his influence is far greater than he would have ever imagined, and his name still sparks fascination. Elijah Wald, author of the new book *Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*, calls Sanchez "the defining figure of the L.A. (corrido) scene." Wald said Morales's unexpected success epitomizes the disconnect between a new underground culture and American mainstream society. He believes that the dominant cultures need to understand subcultures to avoid racial strife. Corridos originated as a nineteenth–century Mexican folk ballad, accompanied mostly by an accordion and 12–string guitar (bajo sexto), that, like storysongs, described tales of Mexican revolutionary heroes. In recent decades, corridos focused on conflict between Mexican outlaws and U.S. authorities. However, the new breed of U.S.–based corrido acts led by Morales and Lupillo Rivera borrow from gangsta rap's appeal. "A lot of poor kids are seeing that the only people in their communities who have money, fancy cars and beautiful models hanging off their arms are the drug traffickers," he said. "And it makes it a very romantic thing."

On the other end of the spectrum are the genre's elder statesmen, Los Tigres del Norte. Though the band got its start in the early 1970s with seminal narcocorridos such as "Contrabando y Traicion" and "La Banda del Carro Rojo," the group has remained a chart force with its activist political songs. For example, "El Centroamericano" from the group's new CD *Uniendo Fronteras* deals with an undocumented Central American immigrant's attempt to pass for Mexican. "He pretends to be Mexican so he will only be deported as far as Mexico," Wald said. "Los Tigres are always coming up with new things. Meanwhile, all the other guys are still just singing about drugs and guns."

Though Texas's contributions to the corrido scene have been minor in recent decades, Wald visited key cities along the Texas–Mexican border. Texas of course, was the birthplace of the seminal "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez," a perfect example of the confrontation Wald describes. The song depicted an actual event that occurred on Cortez's ranch near Karnes City in 1901. His brother was killed by a sheriff while being questioned about a stolen horse. Cortez killed the sheriff and fled on horseback. He was eventually acquitted by a Corpus Christi jury, which found he had acted in self–defense. Over 50 versions of "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" had been recorded by 1958, when University of Texas professor Americo Paredes wrote a book about the episode and its historical context titled *With His Pistol In His Hand.* Wald hitchhiked around Mexico and South Texas, interviewing musicians and fans. What do we learn of import from his travels? That despite the corrido's humble origins, the modern narcocorrido is essentially a Mexican cousin to gangsta rap. And, like the mainstream music industry, sales are largely driven by controversy and celebrity. There is little historical context on U.S.–Mexico relations and the drug war in *Narcocorrido*. Wald's first–person account also wears after a while, and could have benefited from more judicious editing. Still, Wald's book fills a gap. Corridos provide a valuable insight into a large, but largely invisible, segment of the Mexican and American population. "The corrido is sort of a picture of how the world looks to people in the street," he said.

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San Antonio Express–News

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