

Sing Unto Drug Lords a New Song:

The *Narcocorrido*

In the summer of 2015, Mexico suffered yet another embarrassing blow to its bloody and bungled war on drugs: Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, head of the Sinaloa Cartel and the second richest man in Mexico, escaped yet again from prison after slightly more than a year in captivity. Hours after the news broke, as details emerged of his escape through a mile long tunnel (complete with stairs and ventilation),<sup>1</sup> musicians across the nation had already produced their latest works: odes to Mexico’s most famous drug lord. Some songs simply gave praise to the man born in poverty who rose to build a smuggling empire; others cut directly to the matter at hand, lambasting the government for their inability to contain El Chapo. One song in particular, “El Chapo Otra Fuga Mas” (El Chapo Yet Another Escape) mocks the president for his failure, singing “The speech is going to have to be a good one to convince the people... Let’s see what Don Enrique Pena Nieto has to say today.”<sup>2</sup>

While his antics have gained him international notoriety, El Chapo is not the only drug lord to be immortalized through music; today, an entire genre of Mexican music is now dedicated to the glorification of drug traffickers. These offshoots of traditional folk ballads, called *narcocorridos*, spin their criminal activities as daring exploits, depicting them as local heroes. The songs often romanticize the drug trade and the violence accompanying it, justifying these activities in light of these noble heroes who had simply worked their way to the top. In fact, many in the drug trade commission popular bands to write *narcocorridos* about their lives,

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<sup>1</sup> Shoichet, Catherine. "Mexican Drug Lord Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman Escapes - CNN.com." CNN. July 12, 2015. Accessed November 20, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Lupillo Rivera. *El Chapo Otra Fuga Mas*. 2015.

from kingpins seeking to cement their status as criminal legends, to up-and-coming “wannabe” drug runners looking to improve their reputations.<sup>3</sup>

The *narcocorrido* straddles a moral gray area by glorifying the names of murderers; why then has the genre reached such heights among the Mexican people, especially considering that the war it glorifies has killed tens of thousands of their fellow countrymen? Indeed the popularity of these drug ballads reveals much not only about the drug lords for whom they are written, but also about their audience. The *narcocorrido* stems from the genre of northern Mexican *norteño* music, which traditionally glorifies outlaws and appeals to an audience historically oppressed both politically and economically. Out of this older trend, however, a new phenomenon has emerged: through the *narcocorrido*, ethnic Mexicans in the United States have united with their kin across the border in a cultural consciousness unique from other American immigrant stories. Rather than forsaking their homeland and forcing themselves to disappear into the traditional American cultural melting pot, Mexican Americans have instead retained their cultural bonds and ethnic pride; the fact that the *narcocorrido*, a distinctly Mexican cultural item, finds an audience among Mexicans in the United States, suggests that the genre should not just be dismissed as a crass glorification of violence, but rather a prominent and rare example of an American immigrant culture refusing to conform to mainstream American culture.

Stemming from the traditional *ranchero* music of northern Mexico, the history of the *narcocorrido* stretches beyond the rise of the drug trade on the border. During the intense

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<sup>3</sup> Simonett, Helena. 2001. “Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L. A.”. *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2). University of Illinois Press: 324.

Texas-Mexico border conflicts of the early twentieth century, musicians crafted similar ballads in honor of the bandits who fought the American imperialists. As Amanda Marie Morrison writes, these songwriters depicted their subjects as “unassuming yet skilled worker men of the Rio Grande Valley,” otherwise law-abiding men who felt compelled to “defend [their rights] with their pistols in their hands.”<sup>4</sup> Even when the protagonist inevitably meets his violent end, he goes down ever defiant toward the authorities, “in a sense a victor even in defeat.”<sup>5</sup> One particular bandit found his exploits recorded in the famous “Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” whose unknown author depicts his capture in 1901 in the noblest terms:

Cuando llegan los cherifes,	When the sheriffs arrived
Gregorio se presentó:	Gregorio turned himself in.
"Por las buenas si me llevan,	“You can take me only on my terms,
Porque de otro modo no.”	no other way.”
Ya agarraron a Cortez,	They caught Cortez
Ya terminó la cuestión.	and the case is closed.
La pobre de su familia	His poor family
La lleva en el corazón. <sup>6</sup>	is always in his heart.

These songs reflect a longstanding fascination with the noble and masculine outlaw in Mexican society (not unlike the “wild west” trope of American culture), which future drug traffickers would capitalize upon through the *narcocorrido*.

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<sup>4</sup> Morrison, Amanda Maria. 2008. “Musical Trafficking: Urban Youth and the Narcocorrido-hardcore Rap Nexus”. *Western Folklore* 67 (4). Western States Folklore Society: 384.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 324.

<sup>6</sup> “El Corrido De Gregorio Cortez.” Genius. Accessed May 19, 2016

## Origins of Song and War

Mexico's narcotics industry has been well established for nearly a century now, tracing back as far as the Prohibition era, when American demand for illegal substances began to skyrocket. At the time, Mexico acted less as a major competitor in the drug market and more of a corridor to the north for more powerful traffickers. Fueled by cocaine shipments trafficked by Colombian cartels, Mexico rapidly established itself as the premier doorway to the most lucrative market for drugs in the world.<sup>7</sup> Coupled with the institutional political corruption brought on by Mexico's one-party rule, drug trafficking even became something of a state-sponsored enterprise; in 1947, the governor of the state of Sinaloa came under suspicion of leading a trafficking ring himself.<sup>8</sup> The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) solidified ties with the drug trade under the implicit agreement that, in return for limited violence against civilians and public officials, the government would largely leave the traffickers to their own devices.

By the twenty-first century, however, several incidents began to upset the precarious balance which held the country together. The fall of Colombia's Medellin Cartel in the 1980s left the U.S. cocaine market wide open to outsiders, of which Mexican smugglers took full advantage. By 2000, the Sinaloa Cartel had horizontally integrated the cocaine trade almost entirely, from production in South America to distribution in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The influx of new wealth gave rise to a shifting dynamic between the increasingly powerful cartels and the rapidly changing face of the Mexican government. At this time, Mexican one-party autocracy

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<sup>7</sup>Gootenberg, Paul. "Cocaine's Blowback North: A Pre-History of Mexican Drug Violence." *LASA Forum* 42, no. 2 (2011): 9.

<sup>8</sup>Astorga, Luis. "Drug Trafficking in Mexico - Discussion Paper 36." UNESCO. Accessed May 19, 2016.

<sup>9</sup>Gootenberg, "Cocaine's Blowback North", 9.

came to a close as well, with the election of a non-PRI president in 2000. Weaker than its predecessor, the National Action Party (PAN) subsequently came under immense pressure by the American government to combat the drug trade directly, officially considering Mexico's drug cartels to be the "greatest organized crime threat to the United States."<sup>10</sup> Backed by U.S. funding, President Felipe Calderon launched in 2006 the most comprehensive campaign by far to dissolve the drug cartels, sending military soldiers into cartel-controlled states. Fed by the wealth of American market demand and simultaneously provoked by Mexican/American efforts to thwart their success, Mexican traffickers rapidly took up arms against the new initiative and escalated the campaign to the levels of violence currently seen in Mexico today.

#### The Heroism of the *Narco*

The global reputation of the Mexican drug cartels as bloodthirsty and murderous foes, while clearly justified, becomes somewhat complicated as the traffickers take on normal, and even beneficial, roles among their own local communities. By the 1970s, the drug traffickers, or *narcos*, had even become an established social group in northwestern Mexico.<sup>11</sup> Using their newfound wealth, the *narcos* firmly retained control over their spheres of influence not only through violence but through social means as well. Many drug lords even contributed greatly to the well-being of their local communities; El Chapo himself used some of his estimated \$1 billion to help the poor, create jobs and even pave new roads for the people in his home

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<sup>10</sup> Testimony of Secretary Janet Napolitano before Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, *Southern Border Violence: Homeland Security Threats, Vulnerabilities, and Responsibilities*, 111th Cong. (2009) (testimony of Janet Napolitano).

<sup>11</sup> Simonett, Helena. 2001. "Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L. A.". *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2). University of Illinois Press: 323.

state.<sup>12</sup> Their Robin Hood-like benevolence causes many people to overlook and even justify the kidnappings, executions, and other seedy aspects of the drug trade.

From this mix of traditional and modern fixations on outlaw behavior, the *narcocorrido* was born. Lyrically, most modern *narcocorridos* do not need to have much meaning or talent behind them; many songs were only tailored for the specific enjoyment of those who commissioned them. Many ballads thus follow a very simplistic pattern; freelance reporter Sam Quinones notes that most songs “merely say that so-and-so has a nice truck, likes to go to bars and chase women, maybe that he has a pearl handled .45, and that he’s real tough and respected by his friends, so don’t mess with him.”<sup>13</sup> The musical significance of a *narcocorrido*, however, matters less than its primary purpose: to become “a status symbol among drug traffickers...that substantiate wealth, power and success.”<sup>14</sup> This deeper intention of these songs often becomes a source of danger for the musicians themselves, when their patrons’ rivals take notice of their music. In one notorious case, hitmen murdered popular singer Valentin Elizalde in 2006, for performing a song which allegedly dissed the wrong people.<sup>15</sup>

When written at its best, however, the *narcocorrido* even has the power to immortalize its subject. One of the most famous *narcocorridos* of all time recounts the story of a simple drug trafficker, Lamberto Quintero, whose murder in 1976 triggered a battle two days later between

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<sup>12</sup> Khan, Carrie. "Ruthless Mexican Drug Trafficker Was A Robin Hood In Home State." NPR. February 24, 2014. Accessed November 20, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Simonett, Helena. 2001. "Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L. A." *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2). University of Illinois Press: 325.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 323.

<sup>15</sup> Tobar, Hector. "Mexican Singer Dead, Ambushed after Concert / Valentin Elizalde Shot Multiple times in Apparent Gang Hit." SFGate. November 26, 2006. Accessed November 20, 2015.

his family and that of his attackers, in which between twenty and thirty people were killed.<sup>16</sup>

His dramatic death inspired the creation of the ballad, titled “Lamberto Quintero”, which “not only increased Quintero’s fame posthumously, but also immortalized his name,”<sup>17</sup> allowing us to remember a man who would have normally long been forgotten over the decades.

The ballad, much like the nature of the genre itself, shows many of the absurdities of singing the praises of a *narco* and murderer. The instrumentation starts out brassy and triumphant, erupting notes of jolly goodwill for a song detailing the assassination of a drug runner. The springy, lilting trumpets lift the spirits of an otherwise grim topic, accompanied by an equally enthusiastic singer. The lyrics themselves exude the same carefree and almost whimsical spirit, imparting the impression of Lamberto as a heroic bandit like Gregorio Cortez, who, even when faced with death, will smile at the thought of a fight:

Pasaron El Carrizal,	They passed El Carrizal
Iban tomando cerveza,	Continuing to drink beer,
Un companero le dijo:	A companion said to him:
"Nos sigue una camioneta,"	“A van is following us.”
Lamberto sonriendo dijo:	Lamberto said smiling,
"Pa' que son las metralletas?" <sup>18</sup>	“What are our submachine guns for?”

We have only the words of the songwriters to trust for the true disposition of Lamberto at the place of his death, but the almost joyful ballad which chronicles that day can only leave the

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<sup>16</sup> Simonett, Helena. 2001. “Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L. A.”. *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2). University of Illinois Press: 322

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Aguilar, *Lamberto Quintero*, LyricsMode, Accessed May 19, 2016.

listener with the sense, however nagging, that perhaps Lamberto Quintero did indeed grin like a badass, as he cocked his weapon and went out all guns blazing.

### American *Corrido* Hype

Despite the danger to their own selves, many bands continue to write these *narcocorridos*, in part because of their massive popularity not only in Mexico but in the United States as well. As Helena Simonett writes, “The genre is thriving among the rural population of northern Mexico and the immigrant communities of the United States alike.”<sup>19</sup> As “fertile ground for the intertwining of musical, commercial, and criminal networks,” Los Angeles in particular has become a mecca for the *narcocorrido*.<sup>20</sup> Dubbed “Nuevo L.A.” for its ever-increasing Hispanic population, the *narcocorrido* has inextricably ingrained itself into the local culture; one of the city’s most popular radio station is almost entirely devoted to the genre.<sup>21</sup>

As its popularity grows, the *narcocorrido*, as well as the culture from which it stems have left a deep impact on their target audience, many of whom are “young men from rural areas or disreputable urban neighborhoods”.<sup>22</sup> Trapped in a generational cycle of poverty from which there seems to be no legitimate escape, these youth look upon the wealth and glamour of notorious drug lords, many of whom had similarly started out in poverty. The violence and high mortality rate mean little to them; Helena Simonett notes that though they know the risks, they feel that “they have nothing to lose, except life—a life, however, that is full of hardship and

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<sup>19</sup> Simonett, Helena. 2001. “Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L. A.”. *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2). University of Illinois Press: 316.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 316.

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, Amanda Maria. 2008. “Musical Trafficking: Urban Youth and the Narcocorrido-hardcore Rap Nexus”. *Western Folklore* 67 (4). Western States Folklore Society: 381.

<sup>22</sup> Simonett, Helena. 2001. “Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L. A.”. *Ethnomusicology* 45 (2). University of Illinois Press: 323

agony.”<sup>23</sup> The frustration they feel at their unending poverty holds especially true for immigrant youth to the United States, whose taste for prosperity is further sharpened by “the incessant stimuli of L.A. consumer culture.”<sup>24</sup> Coupled with a systemic lack of social mobility for unskilled immigrants, these young men and women search desperately for any “shortcuts and magical paths in personal empowerment,”<sup>25</sup> finding them all too easily in the drug trade.

Despite its negative influences, the *narcocorrido* genre has inextricably become a part of not only Mexican culture, but also that of Mexican Americans. The proliferation of the *narcocorrido* among American immigrants bears special significance, since the genre has an entirely Mexican background and is primarily directed toward a Mexican audience. Throughout American history, the melting pot has integrated the traditions of most immigrant groups into one indistinguishable American culture. Often such integration came not voluntarily, but in the face of an American society long hostile towards foreigners, forcing them to conceal and exchange their Old World cultural identities for a conformist “native” American style, from dropping their native language to embracing American trends in fashion or music. Yet over time, the mentality in American culture took a reverse turn, shifting from prioritizing homogeneity to multiculturalism. Today, instead of trying to completely assimilate into their new country, “‘ethnic groups’ are claiming the right to keep their own identity, to be different.”<sup>26</sup>

Now that so many Mexican Americans no longer feel the need to break ties with their home country, they wear their ethnic pride on their sleeves. As a writer for the *Los Angeles*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 323.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 319.

*Times Magazine* puts it in no uncertain terms: “To say there is Latino pride... would be more of an understatement. It’s more like a cultural revolution... We don’t have to look like Prince or Madonna. We can wear our boots and hats.”<sup>27</sup> Pop musicians are no longer obligated to tailor their music for a mainstream American audience, and Mexican listeners no longer have to limit themselves to mainstream American music to fit in. Mexican people, on both sides of the border, are privy to a musical sensation which, unlike mainstream American pop, does not have a global reach but which they may keep only among themselves. A listener in Los Angeles and one in Mexico City, despite living thousands of miles apart, can both relate to the music as part of a uniquely shared culture which no other country or people can truly understand. For all its flaws, the *narcocorrido* is an entirely Mexican phenomenon, untouched by popular American culture, and just one of the many cultural bonds tying Mexicans and Mexican Americans together.

Despite its glorification of murderers and barons, blaming the wanton violence of the drug war entirely, or even significantly, on the *narcocorrido* is unfair, much like trying to blame American urban violence on gangsta rap. Of course the problem is much more complex than that, stemming from cyclical poverty and American demand for drugs. The musicians who make this kind of music do it for only one reason: to make money. And as long as there is demand for their services, either from drug lords or from the public, they will keep writing songs. So while the drug war rages on and thousands of lives are lost every year, Mexican bands will keep making *narcocorridos*, and fans on both sides of the border will continue listening to them.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 319.

Perhaps one day the *narcocorrido*, and the war that inspired them, will simply become mere relics in Mexico's long and bloody history.

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### Blog Assignment

Music blogs are some of the most highly trafficked and successful sites on the internet. There are thousands of music blogs with varying degrees of popularity, tone, and stature. Think about what blogs you frequent. Do you check Pitchfork every day? Maybe you find yourself on My Old Kentucky Blog or Tiny Mix Tapes for hours at a time. NPR has a fantastic music blog as well.

Select a music blog you LIKE and read 3-4 recent pieces to get a feel for the tone of the blog. Some blogs rely on an austere tone to communicate the facts and others take a more colloquial tone, even using profanity for emphasis. When writing a blog piece you have the freedom to react quickly to news events or tackle complex histories and criticism without space limitations or layout considerations. Writing for a music blog affords you the opportunity to include sound and video to support your story. Sites like YouTube, Vimeo, and SoundCloud allow you to easily copy and embed videos and sound clips into a blog post.<sup>28</sup>

For this assignment, I'd like you to write a blog piece on a topic of your choice. You can explore an unknown scene or style; you can explain a common subjective experience; you can discuss a trend in popular music; you can talk about politics and identity; you can talk about the current state of music criticism; you can delve into the business of music; or you can do something entirely different. The goal, at any rate, is to compose an insightful, detail-oriented piece that adds something new to the conversation about popular music—and to do it in a clear, precise, and engaging style.

Your paper will be due by email before midnight on Wednesday, 3/30. When you turn it in, attach the paper and, in the body of the email, please indicate what publication you would submit your blog piece to and why.

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<sup>28</sup> The first two paragraphs are taken from the blog piece assignment in Marc Woodworth and Ally-Jane Grossan's *How to Write About Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).