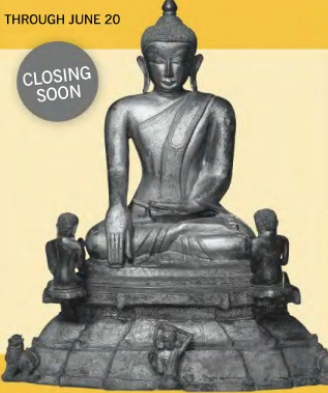


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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

IMMIGRATION BLUES

On the road with Los Tigres del Norte.

BY ALEC WILKINSON

A few days before Christmas, the norteño band Los Tigres del Norte, four brothers and a cousin, were aboard their bus in San Antonio, Texas, on their way to Randy's Ballroom, on the city's west side, which is rough. The brothers are Jorge, Hernán, Eduardo, and Luis Hernández, and the cousin is Oscar Lara. Jorge, the oldest, is the leader. He is watchful and determined, and he dreams of a boardroom where the band for the Super Bowl is chosen by someone who says, "Why not Los Tigres again?" Hernán, who dresses tastefully, and has black hair, with a streak of gray, is gracious, genial, and thoughtful. Eduardo is soulful and reserved and the most gifted musician among them. Luis, who is the youngest, is the heartthrob, and Oscar has the slightly remote air of a man who often appears to be amused by his thoughts.

Also on the bus, which is luxurious, were the band's booking agent, two other brothers—Artemio, a factotum, and Raúl, who left Los Tigres for a solo career in 1996 and is sometimes called the Lone Tiger—and a guest, the virtuoso guitarist Ry Cooder. Los Tigres, who grew up in Mexico but live in San Jose, California, appear on a record made with the Irish band the Chieftains and Cooder, which was released in March. Called "San Patricio," it is about a group of mostly Irish soldiers, the San Patricio Battalion, who deserted the American side to join the Mexican side during the Mexican-American War, in 1846.

Jorge, who believes that cold weather and cold drinks are harmful for singers—he drinks mainly hot tea—had boarded the bus with a black scarf wrapped around his neck and pressed to his mouth, even though the weather in Texas was balmy. Once the bus was under way, he paced, making growling sounds to limber up his vocal cords.

When Los Tigres arrived at Ran-

dy's, at about eleven that night, a man was lying on his back by the front door, having lost a fistfight. A few men stood around him. The club has a low ceiling and a dance floor. The stage was occupied by a band playing aggressively agitated music, called techno-banda, for two thousand people. When they finished, a black, gauzy curtain was raised to the ceiling, while stagehands set up Oscar's drums.

In the past few years, Los Tigres have spent several hundred thousand dollars on close-fitting suits made for them by the Nashville tailor Manuel, who is sometimes called the Rhinestone Rembrandt. At Randy's, they wore green suits with silver rhinestones arranged in a leaflike pattern that descended from their shoulders like wings. An announcer began chanting, "Tigres! Tigres!" Jorge, who plans the band's entrances, strode onstage, already singing into a microphone attached to his cheek, and the curtain fell. Three generations of families sometimes show up to see Los Tigres, and in the front row was a young man who carried a small boy on his shoulders. Behind them were rows of cowboy hats, like a skyline.

Los Tigres sing in Spanish—mainly about things that happen to poor people in Mexico, or to Mexicans in America. When I asked among the crowd what the songs were about, a woman replied, "This is about a man with a dog, and they tell him, 'You better watch your dog, or it will get away,' and it does get away. It's about how the Mafia has taken over Mexico." She was describing the band's most recent song, "La Granja," which means "The Farm," a fable involving barnyard animals, which begins, "If the dog is tied up/even barking all day long/you should not untie her./My grandfather said, 'If they do, they will regret it/'cause they don't know." In six more verses, the song describes, metaphorically, the havoc

caused by the drug lords with the connivance of the government.

"This is 'Three Times a Wetback,'" a young man told me. "They have to go from El Salvador to Guatemala to Mexico to the U.S., each time as an immigrant."

"This is a taxi-driver," another woman said. "He picks up a guy who was in the

cinder-block room behind the stage, where the band members posed for photographs and shook hands and asked, "How is your family?" for about an hour, then walked to the bus. "They will not leave until everyone else leaves first," Alfonso de Alba, their booking agent, told me. Each man climbed the steps and removed his boots and

Eduardo, still stirred up by having been onstage for two hours, started out playing fast and choppy, but he soon slowed down. Now and then, Hernán held out two fingers for Cooder, to indicate two measures of a chord, then one. Oscar kneeled on the seat in front of them, looking over the top of it, as if over a fence. The bus drove through streets



Los Tigres: Luis and Eduardo Hernández, Oscar Lara, and Hernán and Jorge Hernández. Photograph by Richard Patterson.

U.S., and he comes back home and he's telling the driver, 'Take me to this address, where the most beautiful girl in the world lives and is waiting for me. Finally, I have enough money to marry her and buy her the white dress she wants.' And the driver says, 'I don't understand. That's my address. You are talking about my girlfriend,' and the guy from the U.S. tells him, 'Don't stop, keep going.'

A little after two in the morning, the house lights came up, but Los Tigres kept playing. "They were supposed to stop, but the people want them to keep playing," a woman told me. At two-fifteen, a security guard walked onstage and stopped the band.

A long line formed, leading to a

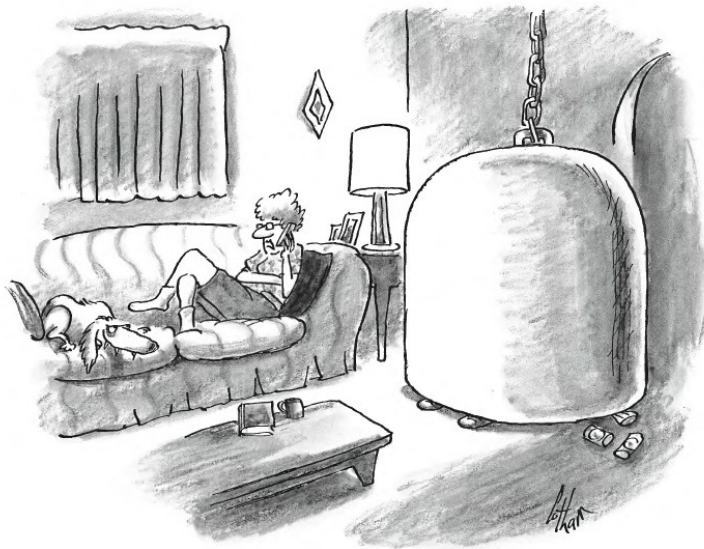
stepped into a pair of fleece slippers laid out for him by Artemio—a ritual, after which each radiated a relief that brought to mind that of a horse shedding a saddle.

Eduardo had an accordion, and someone got a bajo sexto, a variant of the twelve-string guitar, and walked up the aisle and gave it to Cooder, who was sitting in one of the seats, which were like armchairs. The bajo sexto was too wide for the chair, and Cooder had to let part of it ride on the armrest. Eduardo and Hernán began singing, then Jorge, who was eating a banana, joined them. They sang a lament called "My Life Is Failing Me." Cooder did his best to find his way through the song, which he had never heard before.

that were almost empty, the scenery passing in front of the huge windshield like a silent movie. Raúl and Eduardo sang a mournful song, in which their voices were so tightly fitted to each other that they seemed braided, and when they finished someone said, "That's a good one." The title was translated as something like "If I Die by Bullets."

"These are the songs we would play when we were just kids," Jorge told me. When they finished the next song, de Alba said for my benefit, "Oscar's going to sing for you. He hardly ever sings, but he was one of the original voices." Raúl played bajo sexto, and Oscar sang, a little bashfully, a song called "Una Palomita."

At about four-fifteen, the bus arrived



"The containment dome only muffled him."

at the hotel, and Jorge said, "Let's go to sleep." Everyone continued to stand around on the hotel's apron, though, talking.

Norteño is country music from the vicinity of the border. It features succinct and dramatic narratives told in an aloof, almost deadpan language, with high-pitched singing and clipped accordion figures. It is an older, less worldly relation to Tejano, or Tex-Mex. A norteño band includes the bajo sexto (Eduardo and Luis), the electric bass (Hernán), drums (Oscar), and, occasionally, the alto saxophone (also Eduardo), which plays in close harmony with the accordion (Jorge and sometimes Eduardo, too). So as not to distract from the stories, which are usually grave, and sometimes sentimental, the arrangements are compact and spare. The accordion customarily plays an introduction (usually scripted) and makes remarks among the verses, but there are no solos. To convey the import of the song, the singers enunciate as carefully as stage actors.

The trade magazine *Billboard* classifies norteño as Mexican regional music, a subcategory of Latin music. According to Leila Cobo, who covers Latin music for *Billboard*, "No other band is quite as

influential or important as Los Tigres, or has had quite the impact, or is quite this well known." Since 1972, they have sold thirty-four million records. In Mexico, fourteen movies, in which they appear, have been adapted from their songs. In 2002, more people saw them at the Houston Astrodome than had ever seen a concert there before: 67,002. (Fifty-five thousand people heard the Beatles at Shea Stadium in 1965.) In Mexico City, an audience of a hundred and twenty thousand is typical. John Reilly, Los Tigres' press agent, at Rogers & Cowen, a firm that has also represented the Rolling Stones and Elton John, told me that most acts have to be taken through the kitchen when they return to their hotels, to avoid the fans in the lobby. Los Tigres have to go through the front door. "You take them through the kitchen, and you shut down the hotel," he said. "There is no room service, no more maid service, and the housekeeping closes down."

Los Tigres may be the only arena act in the world that doesn't use a set list. Customarily when they take the stage, they have in mind three songs to play. Meanwhile, people write titles on scraps of paper that they hand through the crowd until the papers are thrown

onto the stage. The band picks up the papers. The concert is over when the stage is clean.

Los Tigres call their performances dances, not concerts. The distinction embodies the traditions of norteño, which was originally made by people who worked all day, then played in the evening for the people they had worked beside, who would dance. How long they played depended upon how long the dancers wanted them to play. Recently, in Monterrey, Los Tigres played in an outdoor lot in the rain for more than eight hours. Among the sixty thousand people who heard them was Cooder, who had never seen the group perform. "The most powerful demonstration of talent, dedication, message, and audience love and devotion there ever could be," he told me. "My wife and I watched a guy who acted out every line of every song. Tall, young guy singing every word, for hours. He would do things with his hands, very theatrical, almost like sign language, to dramatize the words and scenes—tremendous intensity. You have not seen the like in a rock show, and you have not seen it in Vegas, and you have not seen it in Nashville, either." Los Tigres had begun playing at midnight, and sometime before dawn Cooder and his wife, Susan, fatigued, had returned to their hotel. At nine o'clock, as they were checking out, Los Tigres came through the lobby and said, "We just finished."

A few weeks ago, in Brooklyn, Los Tigres took the stage at around one in the morning and played until four; they would have played longer but the building, an armory, had a curfew. Eight thousand people, many of them dressed like cowboys, paid fifty dollars for a ticket. Balls of paper flew in arcs between the crowd and the musicians, and sometimes grazed them. Los Tigres wore black suits with red and green highlights in a sort of twining, peacock-feather pattern. A few hundred feet from the stage, shadowy figures could be seen rising and falling, like hobby horses—couples dancing.

Norteño is not ingratiating music. In essence, it is Mexicanized polka. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, deposits of iron ore and copper were discovered in the north of Mexico, and Czechs and Germans arrived to work in the mines and in the smelters. They were dust-bowl types who brought the accordion, which

fit into their luggage. They also brought the polka. The Mexican version is more exuberant than the European one, and has more flourishes. The Mexicans play it so that it sounds like music from a warm region instead of a cold one.

Norteño is also a little disreputable. According to Chris Strachwitz, the head of Arhoolie Records, who has collected hundreds of thousands of the songs—which are housed in a foundation at U.C.L.A. that was established with a grant of half a million dollars from Los Tigres—“Norteño is field-hand music, drunkard’s music. Lower-class music.” He goes on, “Class isn’t so important in the gringo world, but in Mexico it is. Many people in Mexico look down on this music.” Mariachi, which features trumpets and violins and was a favorite of Richard Nixon, is a music of longing for the period of the haciendas, the great estates and plantations. Norteño is the music made by the people who sustained the haciendas with their labor. It began to be recorded in the nineteen-twenties. The modern norteño band, built around the accordion, was established in Monterrey, in the fifties.

The majority of Los Tigres’ songs are corridos, a species of compressed ballad characteristic of norteño. Corridos are a form of bulletin. Something of consequence, usually violent, happened somewhere, and the corrido is the medium for broadcasting it. (One could think of the Iliad as a long-form corrido.) Corridos began to appear in northern Mexico in the eighteen-sixties and have a single reference, the border. They emerged to express the strife that ensued when a remote and unified territory was divided suddenly, following the Mexican War. No corrido has been written that is not somehow in the shadow of this circumstance. Antique corridos had bad men and cattle drives and border disputes as subjects, as did cowboy ballads—the explanation being that the culture of the region was an amalgamation of Mexican and Anglo elements. According to the corrido scholar Elijah Wald, this is why so many cowboy words, such as “lasso,” “rodeo,” “bronco,” “buckaroo,” “canyon,” and *galón*, which means braid, as in ten-gallon hat—a hat tall enough for ten braids—are Spanish.

The villains in many early corridos were the Texas Rangers, who were regarded as violent henchmen for land-grabbing ranchers. Often, the Rangers,

called “rinches,” were described satirically. In an old-fashioned corrido, a Texas Ranger might kill the hero’s wife—or his children or parents or brothers and sisters—in a cowardly way. The hero kills the Ranger, Texas sends more Rangers, who are afraid of the hero, who kills them, too. Eventually, the hero is killed, often by Rangers who overwhelm him or trick him or creep up on him and shoot him in the back, or, as a matter of honor, he allows himself to be captured. Essentially, corridos describe a defeat, but a dignified one. Had the hero not been provoked, he would have lived peacefully. Because an indefatigable antipathy existed between the Mexicans and the Rangers, there were always new corridos.

During the early twentieth century, the corrido became a sympathetic home to war stories, and lots of corridos were written about Pancho Villa, the peasant bandit and hero general who raised an army of cowboys during the Mexican Revolution. A dominant theme in modern corridos is the anxieties and dangers of crossing the border illegally.

Los Tigres’ first song about migrants, from 1974, was “Vivan los Mojados” (“Long Live the Wetbacks”). Blame and accusations in corridos tend to be expressed delicately, couched in metaphors and double meanings and codes, and, especially, humor. Corridos are not con-

frontational. Often, though, they contain boasts and defiant remarks, and “Vivan los Mojados” typifies this:

If they throw one of us out in Laredo
Ten more come in through Mexicali
If others are thrown out in Tijuana
Six enter through Nogales.
So it’s not worth counting how many of
us enter each month.

Like the blues, corridos have a codified form. “The sonic template has hardly changed since the nineteen-twenties,” Josh Kun, an associate professor in the Annenberg School of Communication at U.S.C., told me. “If you change it too much, you’re no longer beloved.” As a rule, corridos have three major chords and rarely any minor ones, and only verses, no choruses. Their melodies usually fall within an octave, and are delivered at the top of the singer’s range, in order to convey a sense of urgency.

In addition, corridos are almost always factual, or at least claim to be. Their audience no more cares to hear about imaginary characters and imaginary happenings than the readers of the *Wall Street Journal* would care to read about made-up businessmen and made-up business deals. Corrido writers often collect material as if they were reporters. Paulino Vargas, who has written for Los Tigres, has said that when he hears about something that might provide a fit subject for a corrido he



“It’s a business hoodie.”

likes to visit the place where the event took place and talk to people who witnessed it.

For the majority of their songs, Los Tigres rely on four or five writers, a few of whom specialize in corridos. (The band also sings boleros—romantic songs—and cumbias, which are the equivalent of light verse.) People write letters to Los Tigres telling their stories. They shake hands with the band members as they pose with them and say, “The first time we came to the border, my wife was pregnant and they turned us away, because they said we were undesirable and a threat, so we paid a man my brother-in-law knew in Tijuana with a truck. . . .” When Jorge hears a story that he thinks will make a good corrido, he consults with one of the band’s writers. The writer works up a draft, and Jorge responds. “There’s a lot of editing,” he said. He likes a corrido to resemble a play, with characters whose mistakes or misfortunes seem real to the audience. Chris Strachwitz said there will always be norteño music, because there will always be people trying to cross the border.

The Anglos most likely to be aware of Los Tigres are those who live in cities where there are radio stations that play Mexican music, or who go to Mexican restaurants that have jukeboxes. Cooder first heard the band in 1974, on the jukebox of a taco place in Venice, California. “They had this record with sirens and gunshots, which was very forward at the time, ‘La Banda del Carro Rojo,’” he told me. “Ballad of the Red Car. It’s a drug story. It told about being set up, being eliminated—it’s a treachery story—huge, huge, huge hit, biggest norteño record ever till then. It went on for a year. After that, I noticed on my radio in the car that it was on all the time.”

The singer Linda Ronstadt, who grew up in Tucson with a Mexican-American father, also first heard Los Tigres on the radio. “My Spanish is so bad that, every time I heard something I liked, I would be saying, ‘Who’s that?’ and it was Tigres,” she told me. “The funny thing is, I would hear the songs and think, ‘That’s a tough life they’re describing, they must be rough guys—and they’re actually so elegant.’”

On their album covers, Los Tigres look rangy, but none of them are tall. Onstage and in their photographs, Jorge’s position is signified by his being the only one who

wears a hat—by contract a Stetson, but sometimes he wears either a Tony Milano or a Larry Mahan, both of whom are respected Texas hatmakers. (Offstage, he goes hatless, but he almost always has a hatbox in the trunk of his Mercedes.) More by other people than by his brothers, Jorge is frequently called El Jefe, the Chief, for one of their songs, “Jefe de Jefes,” which sold more than a million copies and is the bragging monologue of a powerful man whom people are afraid of.

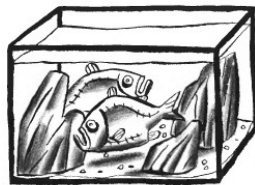
According to their mother, Consuelo, who lives in Calexico, California, across the border from Mexicali, Jorge’s grandfather wanted him to be a teacher. “He was very bright, and he loved sports, and he was always a dreamer,” she told me. He also liked to race horses. He has a long, wide, flat, and handsome face, and he almost always appears preoccupied and worried, which makes him look as if he were scowling. He watches the others the way a coach might watch his athletes, to see who needs attention or consolation or to be told to fall into line. As a means of preserving his past, he insists that only Spanish be spoken in his house, but his son, Jorge, Jr., who manages the band’s affairs, calls himself George.

At the beginning of their career, Los Tigres followed fruit and vegetable pickers through the West and the Midwest, but now there are enough Mexicans in the South and the Northeast that they play all over the country. They first came to New York in the nineteen-seventies. “We used to play Roseland, but no one would come out,” Jorge told me. Because their audience works during the week, they tour less in the manner of rock and pop musicians, who are often on the road for weeks and months at a time, playing night after night, and more in the manner of drag racers, who race on the weekends and go home. I have heard that when Los Tigres argue, which is not often, they go tooth and nail, so Jorge has arranged that they discuss business during the week. That way, any discord dissolves by the weekend, when, according to his wife, Blanca,

a former actress, “they have to be entirely artists.”

Except for Los Tigres’ suits, their pearly accordions, and Hernán’s bass, which is painted orange with black stripes, the band’s stagecraft is unadorned. For the most part, they play without props or fancy backdrops, although occasionally there’s a smoke machine. Jorge sings in the penetrating tone that is characteristic of singers from his home state of Sinaloa. Occasionally, to sustain a dying note, he will use vibrato, but only a trace of it. His signature gesture is to lift his hat while raising one leg, a little like a hood ornament. It is a species of salute, and when he does it men in the audience raise their hats, too. Jorge says that he does not plan the gesture. “You get the emotion for it,” he said. Mostly, he remains in one place while he sings, but sometimes he turns in profile and plants one foot and leans into it, as if to resist a pressure that is opposing him. Or he stamps one heel, like a flamenco dancer. On songs where the tempo is not urgent, he walks around thoughtfully, giving the impression that the words are occurring to him as he sings, as if they were a kind of confession. On boleros, the entire band seems to move here and there in a trancelike way, as if on currents.

Jorge’s father, Eduardo, was a rancher in Rosa Marada, a town of about a hundred houses, where he also farmed. He and his wife had seven sons and four daughters. Calling themselves Los Allegres de Rosa Marada, Jorge, Raúl, and Hernán sang and played in school parades and at private parties. One morning in 1965, their father woke and couldn’t move his legs. (It turned out that he had nerve problems and needed an operation.) To help support the family, the boys began travelling to Los Mochis, two hours away, where Oscar lived, and playing in “joints for a dollar a song,” Raúl told me. “Stories, tragedies, whatever the people were wanting.” After about a year, they began going on weekends to Mexicali, a fifteen-hour trip. They wore black pants and white shirts, and they walked with their instruments from one club to another, where they arranged with the whores to have their dates request songs, and then they would kick back money to them. When the authorities arrived, the women



A GLOSSARY OF CHICKENS

There should be a word for the way
they look with just one eye, neck bent,
for beetle or worm or strewn grain.
“Gleaning,” maybe, between “gizzard”
and “grit.” And for the way they run
toward someone they trust, their skirts
hiked, their plump bodies wobbling:
“bobbling,” let’s call it, inserted
after “blowout” and before “bloom.”
There should be terms, too, for things
they do not do—like urinate or chew—
but perhaps there already are.
I’d want a word for the way they drink,
head thrown back, throat wriggling,
like an old woman swallowing
a pill; a word beginning with “S,”
coming after “sex feather” and before “shank.”
And one for the sweetness of hens
but not roosters. We think
that by naming we can understand,
as if the tongue were more than muscle.

—Gary Whitehead

would hide the band in the bathroom.

Every Monday, dressed identically, the boys would go to the telegraph office to wire money home. A man who worked there asked if they were in a band, and then he said that he knew people who took bands to America. Along with some mariachis, some mimes, some girl dancers, two singers, and a comedian, they were engaged to perform for the Mexican inmates of Soledad, a prison about sixty miles south of San Jose. The guard at the border gave them a form for their parents to sign. Jorge, who was still a teen-ager, didn’t speak English then. “I ask, ‘What is he saying?’ and they tell me, ‘He’s asking if your mother is here,’ and I say, ‘Tell him yes,’” Jorge told me. Then he went and found a woman, and said, “Make me the favor, please, so I can show this immigration man,” and she turned and waved at the man, who called Jorge back and said that since his mother had vouched for him it wasn’t necessary for her to sign the form. Because they were so small and determined, the immigration guard said, “I’m going to baptize you Los Tigrillos,” Hernán told me. “And Jorge said, ‘No, we are Los Tigres.’”

From Soledad, where they played

“Cielito Lindo” and “Viva Mexico,” to remind the prisoners of home, they went to San Jose for the Mexican Independence Day parade. In the meantime, the man who had sponsored them disappeared with their passports; Jorge assumes that he didn’t want to pay them for the concert. After the parade, they were invited to play at a Mexican restaurant called El Paseo de las Flores, where their performance was broadcast on the radio. They had planned to go back to Mexico, but toward the end of the show an Englishman named Art Walker arrived at the restaurant.

Walker was small and wore glasses, and he didn’t speak much Spanish, but he had heard Los Tigres on the radio. He was a rack jobber for a record company—a distributor who visited stores and put records in the racks—and had his own small label, Discos Fama, on which he wanted to record Los Tigres. Walker is no longer alive, but according to Chris Strachwitz, “He had been interested in rhythm and blues, but then he married a Chicana and thought, This music is more fun. He loved the experience of hanging out with Mexican musicians in this alien world.” Hernán told me that Walker “was

very excited when he arrived. He liked the way we sang.” He offered to help the band stay in San Jose. The owner of El Paseo de las Flores said that the band could play at the club every Sunday, and live with his mother. “For a year, we all live in one room,” Hernán recalled. “You look for a way to make her happy, because she was very old and a mean person.”

Hernán enrolled in elementary school, and Jorge, Raúl, and Oscar went to night school to learn English. Jorge got a job at San Jose State University, as a janitor, and Oscar and Raúl worked as gardeners. Meanwhile, they played in restaurants for tips and at El Paseo—on the radio—where people would hear them and hire them for fiestas and weddings and birthday parties. They made four records for Discos Fama with Art Walker, who took the records to the San Jose flea market, but “nothing was happening,” Hernán said.

In 1972, Walker took Jorge to a bar in Los Angeles to hear a songwriter perform a song called “Contrabando y Traición.” Jorge saw how much the audience liked the song and was surprised to learn that the writer had never recorded it. After they talked for a while, he gave the song to Jorge. “He told me, ‘Maybe you can make something of it,’” Jorge said. The song, which the band members sometimes call “La Camelia,” is about two smugglers, Camelia and Emilio, who are lovers and cross the border with marijuana in the spare tire of their pickup. After they arrive in Los Angeles, and receive their money, Emilio tells Camelia that he loves someone else. He tells her that he’s leaving for San Francisco to meet the love of his life. Camelia shoots him, then places the pistol beside his body. She takes the money and disappears.

“This was the first story that people liked from Los Tigres, and that began our career,” Jorge said. “After that, my phone started ringing like crazy—three, four in the morning, everybody called me.” Even so, Raúl said, “when ‘Camelia’ came out we were afraid to leave our jobs, because we didn’t know if it was true that ‘La Camelia’ was so strong.”

“Contrabando y Traición” was Los Tigres’ first narcocorrido, a subgenre that younger bands have made more lurid and flamboyant. Historically, in the region of the border, smugglers

have been regarded as benign figures. They outwitted the Rangers, and so were admired. These days, small-scale smugglers are seen as men and women who are desperate to escape poverty. Large-scale smugglers spread their money around. Los Tigres have sung sympathetically of small-time smugglers and have deplored the corruption that the drug lords cause.

Contemporary narcocorridos are sometimes commissioned by drug lords to publicize their exploits. Periodically, the Mexican government attempts to suppress narcocorridos, because some people feel that they glorify criminals, the way some people feel that gangsta rap glorifies misogynists. Last January, the National Action Party, which is the ruling party in Mexico, proposed a bill that would send someone who sang a song celebrating drug dealers to prison for three years. (It has not yet been voted on.) Jorge regards this as censorship. "In the stories, we say things that are already happening," he told me. "We can't hide these problems. They're every day on the TV and the Internet and in the papers. It's not happening because we're singing those songs. It's happening because there is no money, because the people have no respect for the government."

Los Tigres' narcocorridos are more cautionary tales than aggrandizements. In "La Banda del Carro Rojo," the smugglers die in a shootout with the police. In a narcocorrido called "The Gray Pickup," the smugglers, a young man and a woman, fleeing the police, die when they crash into a train. "On 'Jefe de Jefes,' we say that people who do smuggling end up in three places," Jorge said. "The hospital, the jail, or the cemetery. And we end by saying, '*Portense bien.*' Behave."

Because Los Tigres live in America and are American citizens, they are not particularly vulnerable to Mexican politics, but they have had songs banned from the radio because they criticized the government. Last October, they went to Mexico City to receive an award and to perform at the ceremony, which would be televised. They planned to play "La Granja," but, according to Jorge, on the afternoon of the performance the organizers said that they couldn't. The Mexican Interior Ministry, the body in charge of broadcast standards, said that it hadn't prohibited the band's playing the song,

but the hall in which the ceremony was held belonged to the government, and the wording of the government's statement denying that it had interfered is elusive. In interviews carried by several newspapers, among them the *Los Angeles Times*, Jorge asked that the censorship be explained. A couple of hours before the ceremony, he said, he was told that Los Tigres could play "La Granja." He felt that there was no longer time to rehearse, however, and they withdrew.

The video of "La Granja," which appears on the band's Web site, shows cartoon pigs, representing bankers and prosperous businessmen, who are shielded in the farmhouse from the violence of the barnyard, and a ferocious dog, who represents drug traffickers and keeps to her doghouse until a fox, representing Vincente Fox and the government, enrages her by trying to steal her dinner. The fox escapes and the dog chases the farmer, who runs but is stopped by the fence at the border. The dog attacks him, while the farm, where he used to be able to plant crops, dries up and turns into a desert.

"Because the dog got out/everything got messed up./All us farmers/have to tie her back up," Los Tigres sing. The video concludes with the dog being confronted by a huge tiger on a chain, which stands beside the farmer, who taunts the dog while Los Tigres struggle to hold the tiger back.

Los Tigres make the people they sing about feel powerful. "They carry the tale for all these border people," Linda Ronstadt told me. "Los Tigres are singing their sorrows and their hopes and their fears, and the fear is so tremendous. The drug cartels, which might find you and make you carry something for them, or kill you for crossing their territory; the chance of dying from the heat or suffocating in the back of a truck; the border guards, some of whom are nice and some of whom are not, and you can't tell; the consequences of being caught and held for weeks and then sent back penniless. The dangers are horrific, and all they have is that tiger walking with them."

The night before Los Tigres played in San Antonio, they performed at a hockey rink in McAllen. On the way there, Jorge went to the back of the bus to warm up his voice, and we could hear

him singing scales. On either side of an aisle were three leather seats and some television screens, then a small kitchen with a bench, then, at the back, where Jorge sat, a lounge with a leather couch and pillows and big windows. Cooder watched a noir movie about a young Mexican boxer being set up by gangsters. Once the driver had parked, Cooder said that we should give Los Tigres privacy to dress, so we went out and stood on the pavement beside the bus.

"Great metaphor," Cooder said of the movie. "Mexican boxers from the ghetto. The odds are stacked. Nothing can ever go your way. You go down. Used up by thirty. Tragedy of the poor man's life. Trying to find a way out, and he can never make it, and it can never be good. Watching that movie on this bus with those guys, that's *it*."

The door of the bus opened, and Jorge asked if we didn't want to come in. When Cooder said that we wanted to let the band get dressed, Jorge said, "Are you sure? My bus is your bus." Cooder said, "*Mi casa es su casa*," then we went into the arena. Boards had been laid on the ice, and a stage had been built at one end. In front of the stage, as if in a night club, were two rows of tables, for people who were affiliated with Telemundo, the sponsor. A tall woman wearing a near-backless dress, with high heels, made an announcement with a man dressed in the costume of a big blue "T." Cooder, catching sight of the band, said, "Oh, look, they got red suits," and I turned and saw Los Tigres wearing suits covered with rhinestones in a paisley pattern. An announcer said, "*Tres, dos, uno, Los Tigres del Norte*," and Jorge walked onstage waving his white hat.

Los Tigres sound better live than they do on records, but the arena had a metal roof that made the sound a little brittle. When that happens, Cooder said, it returns to the stage as an echo, making it difficult to hear yourself, and Jorge labored all night to find the right pitch. When he held a note, it seemed to rise and fall, like a siren coming closer then passing. After about two and a half hours, a mirrored ball at the top of the arena began to turn, and the lights came up. In a room at the back of the stage, Los Tigres shook hands and posed for photographs for nearly two hours. The

last person in line was a friend from Mexico City. On the bus, each of the musicians stepped out of his boots and then, almost daintily, into the pair of fleece slippers that had been laid out for him.

The drive the next morning, to San Antonio, took about five hours. Jorge said that I could sit in his seat, because he was going to sit in back and play his accordion. Except for the dance in McAllen, he hadn't played for four days, he said, and his hand was stiff. The others tried to find another boxing film for Cooder, but the only thing on was a comedy from the fifties, about twin brothers who had been adopted separately and were now cowboys engaged in a dispute, each unaware of the other's identity. We had watched about an hour of the movie when the bus came to a stop. Through the window, I saw something like a toll booth and a bunch of cops standing around. Someone said, "Everybody got their papers?," and the band members started searching through their travel bags. The bus was made to pull over to the side of the road.

A skinny young Caucasian guy, with a crew cut and jug ears, walked up the aisle asking each of us, "You an American citizen?" The officer who came aboard behind him was Hispanic, and he held up a camera and said, "Can I take a picture?" The white officer turned around, apparently unaware of who the Mexicans were, and said peevishly, "No." Then he said something that I didn't hear, and the others stood up. They walked toward the door and down the steps, then stood in a row by the side of the road, as if in a lineup. An officer on the pavement had a German shepherd on a leash. He led the dog slowly past each of us, then onto the bus, and when he came back he made the driver open the hold so that the dog could go through the bags and the instruments, too. Then we were allowed back onto the bus. The rest of the way, Hernán and Eduardo and Luis and Raúl and Oscar mostly watched soccer, and Jorge played his accordion so softly that I could hear it only now and then. ♦

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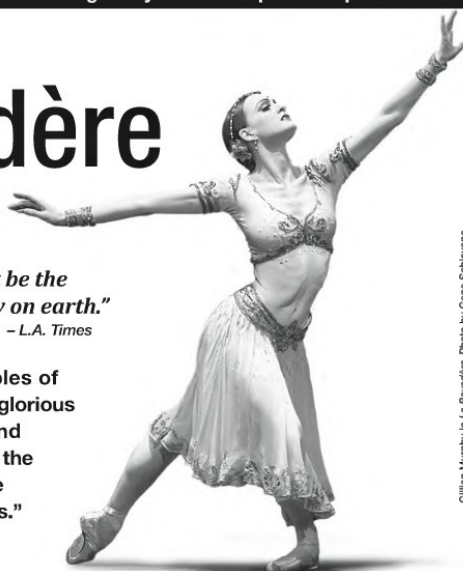
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