

The Strachwitz Frontera Collection

of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings

Strachwitz Frontera Collection

The Mexican Corrido: Ballads of Adversity and Rebellion, Part 1: Defining the Genre

Agustin Gurza | Thursday, November 2, 2017 | 1 comments

Part 1: Defining the Genre

The corrido is often described as a narrative ballad, which is an accurate though insufficient definition. Narrative ballads exist in many countries, including the United States. But the form that developed in Mexico in the late 1800s is deeply rooted in that country's specific cultural history, and especially the inequitable relationship with its conquering neighbor to the North.

The corrido is considered one of the foremost folk expressions of Mexico's rural, working-class culture. These historical ballads were shared at first as an oral tradition then propagated as part of the record industry on both sides of the border. Since the late 19th century through the present day, corridos have documented the actions and exploits of the famous, the infamous and the anonymous everyman. These dramatic ballads have served as newspapers for society's oppressed and dispossessed, a first draft of history told from the perspective of the poor.



El%20Corrido%20y%20la%20Cronica%20Popular%2C%20LP%20Cover%2C%20Vol.%201%20from%20the%20series%20 Historia%20Ilustrada%20de%20la%20M%3%BAlica%20Popular%20Mexicana as an art form during a tumultuous century marked by war and revolution, corridos often provided an eyewitness to historic events in Mexico and helped define its modern, national identity. The corrido captures Mexican values and ideals through the actions of the genre's epic protagonists: bandits and folk heroes, traitors and patriots, iconic revolutionaries and lowly recruits.

Today, the corrido is a trans-national art form. Composers, known as corridistas, touch on topics from the War with Mexico to the Gulf War in Iraq (<http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/recordings/la-guerra-de-iraq>), from the assassination of Pancho Villa (<http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/recordings/la-muerte-de-pancho-villa-parte-1-0>) to the assassination of John F. Kennedy (<http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/recordings/el-asesinato-del-presidente-john-f-kennedy>), from the spurned lover who shoots down his rival to the local hero who dies attempting to save his town.

The Frontera Collection is one of the world's most comprehensive repositories of this essential Mexican folk art. The archive encompasses virtually the entire 100-year lifespan of the recorded genre itself. A search of the archives yields almost 10,000 items ([http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/frontera-search?frontera basic index field recording genre=corrido](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/frontera-search?frontera%20basic%20index%20field%20recording%20genre=corrido)) identified as corridos, or one of its subgenres. (Some of the tracks are duplicates of the same song on different labels or different media.) But the most valuable part of Frontera's corrido collection lies in its extensive selection on 78-rpm discs recorded during the genre's golden era, the first half of the 20th century.

"Corridos have an amazing life," says Chris Strachwitz, record producer and founder of The Frontera Collection. "They are written about events that took place decades ago, but they still resonate with people as if they were hearing them for the first time."

(http://



However, while all corridos are narrative ballads, not all ballads are corridos. What is missing is that crucial cultural context that makes corridos uniquely Mexican.

"I haven't encountered anything close to the Mexican corrido," Strachwitz says.

Experts agree the corrido has its roots in the narrative poetry of Europe, transplanted to the Americas by Spanish conquistadors through the *romance español* ([https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_\(poes%C3%ADa\)](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_(poes%C3%ADa))). The oldest known corridos in the Americas are from Argentina and Chile, predating those in Mexico, according to the late Guillermo Hernandez (<http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jul/22/local/me-hernandez22>), a Spanish professor and corrido expert who was instrumental in bringing the Frontera Collection to UCLA.

"It was probably a continental phenomenon, but in Mexico it really exploded as a genre," said Hernandez.

Mexico's unique corrido style evolved during the 100-year period between two major internal upheavals: the War of Independence of 1810 and the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In between, there was the U.S.–Mexico War of 1846–1848, a defining historic event, both for the country and the corrido.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 ended the war and established the current border. Mexico surrendered half its territory in the bargain. The United States, with its resounding victory, could claim vindication for its racist rationale for war: that Manifest Destiny preordained white Americans to claim the continent from coast to coast and that Mexicans, viewed as a barbaric and inferior breed, were just in the way.



(<http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/>

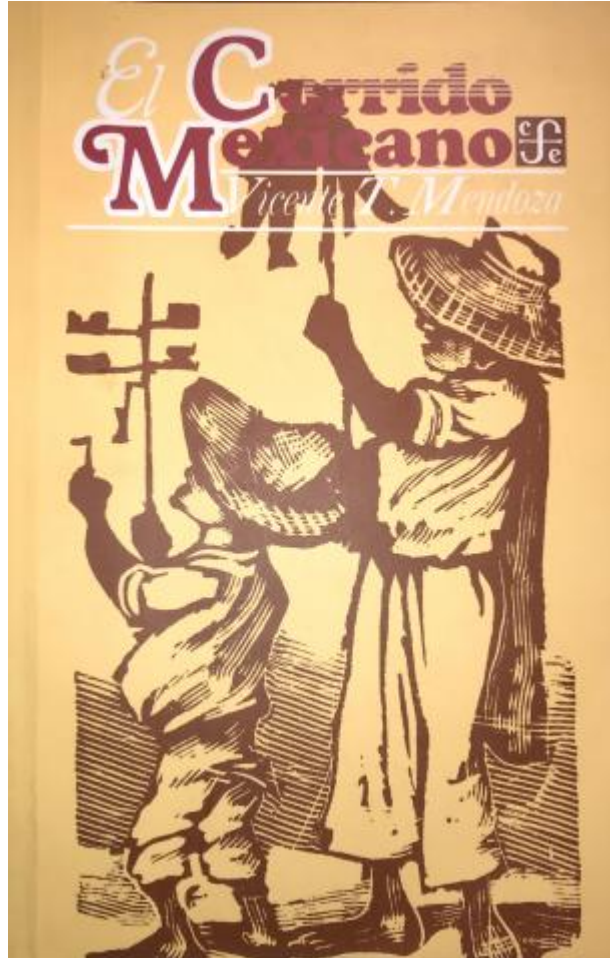
[Americo%20Paredes Image%20of%20Paredes%20next%20to%20bookshelf.jpg](#))The corrido was created in the crucible of this violent inter-cultural conflict, according to Américo Paredes (<https://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/paredes/biography.html>), one of the leading corrido scholars in the United States. Paredes saw the border region as a cultural flashpoint, a geographic scar that painfully underscored the vast disparities of wealth, power, and customs between the two countries. The corrido emerged as an expression of cultural resistance against the advancing dominant Anglo culture. It was a musical response to hostile conditions: the foreign invasion, the loss and occupation of territory, the treatment of Mexicans as second-class citizens.

As Paredes puts it, the Mexicans' "slow, dogged struggle against economic enslavement and the loss of their own identity was the most important factor in the development of a distinct local balladry."

A seminal book on the genre is the 1939 study by Mexican musicologist Vicente T. Mendoza (1894–1964), entitled *El Romance Español y el Corrido Mexicano* (<https://www.abebooks.com/book-search/title/el-romance-espanol-y-el-corrido-mexicano-estudio-comparativo/author/mendoza-vicente-t/>). Mendoza, who spent his life exploring the song form, identifies six formal ballad conventions that define the corrido. They are:

1. The initial call to the public by the *corridista*, sometimes called the formal opening
2. The setting of time and place and naming of the protagonist
3. The arguments of the protagonist
4. The message
5. The farewell of the protagonist
6. The farewell of the *corridista*

[\(http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/)



[El%20Corrido%20Mexicano%2C%20a%20corrido%20anthology%20by%20Vicente%20T.%20Mendoza%20%28Fondo%20de%20Cultura%20Economica%29.jpg](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/El%20Corrido%20Mexicano%2C%20a%20corrido%20anthology%20by%20Vicente%20T.%20Mendoza%20%28Fondo%20de%20Cultura%20Economica%29.jpg)) Nowadays, corridos no longer hew to this formal structure. Even in the old days, not every corrido contained every defined element. But, as noted by the Handbook of Texas Online, every corrido must tell a story of either local or national interest: “a hero's deeds, a bandit's exploits, a barroom shootout, or a natural disaster.”

In his introduction to another important Paredes study, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* (<https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/parfol>), Richard Bauman writes, “For Paredes, the true corrido tradition centers around a spirit of heroic bravado, of defiant manly self-confidence, and this spirit is rooted in the emergent sense of Mexican nationalism...”

The bravado and “manly self-confidence” were evident from the very first corrido on record, “El Corrido de Kiansis,” (<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/jaime/cwp4/ckg/overview.html>) about the early cattle drives across Texas to Kansas. In this case, the conflict is not violent but professional, depicting the Mexicans as better cowboys than the hapless Gringos. Paredes calls this cowboy ballad “the oldest

Texas-Mexican corrido preserved in a complete form,” dating from the 1860s or early 1870s.^[1]

*Quinientos novillos eran, todos grandes y livianos,
y entre treinta Americanos no los podían embalar.*

*Llegan cinco mexicanos, todos bien enchivarrados,
y en menos de un cuarto de hora los tenían encerrados.*

*Esos cinco mexicanos al momento los echaron,
y los treinta Americanos se quedaron azorados.*

Five hundred steers there were, all big and quick;
Thirty American boys could not keep them bunched together.

Then five Mexicans arrive, all of them wearing good chaps;
And in less than a quarter-hour, they had the steers penned up.

Those five Mexicans penned up the steers in a moment,
And the thirty Americans were left staring in amazement.

In the next installment: Early corridos about Mexican folk heroes considered border bandits by the Anglo public.

-- Agustín Gurza

Additional reading:

[The Mexican Corrido: Ballads of Adversity and Rebellion, Part 2: Border Bandits or Folk Heroes \(http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/11/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-2-border-bandits-or-folk-heroes\)](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/11/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-2-border-bandits-or-folk-heroes)

[The Mexican Corrido: Ballads of Adversity and Rebellion, Part 3: Two-Part Corridos \(http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/11/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-3-two-part-corridos\)](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/11/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-3-two-part-corridos)

[The Mexican Corrido: Ballads of Adversity and Rebellion, Part 4: Corridos of the Mexican Revolution \(http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/12/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-4-corridos-mexican-revolution\)](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/12/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-4-corridos-mexican-revolution)

[1] “The Mexican Corrido: Its Rise and Fall in Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border.” Austin, TX: CMAS, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1995. Print. page 140

1 Comments

THE OLDEST CORRIDO

by Gerardo Caro (not verified), 10/02/2019 - 00:26

My understanding, the oldest corrido was written in 1811 in Zacatecas about Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla called:

Las Mañanas de Hidalgo

Artist biography

Featured song

Genre history

Label history

© 2020 UC Regents & The Arhoolie Foundation