

Music and Verse from Mexican Migrant Workers

From the towns of the central Mexican state of Guanajuato, a constant flow of migrant workers moves toward the northern border. Just about every family in the area has at least one member who has migrated to the United States at one time or another. Thus, the subject of migration and the living conditions of undocumented workers crops up constantly in every day conversation. And in small towns, the loudspeakers installed in the main square blare out the North Mexican polkas, brought back by returning immigrants, along with the *Son Arribeño*, the region's typical folk music.

The *son*, in all its varied forms, was born when Indian hands and sensibilities took up the string instruments the Spaniards brought to what today is Mexico. The *son* varies from region to region. The *Son Huasteco*, for example, is sung in a falsetto voice, inimitable for anyone not born in the Huasteca region¹. The *Son Veracruzano*, sung along the Mexican Gulf Coast, uses a combination of harp, violin and *jarana* (a small guitar) to produce cascading bell-like sounds that accompany lively salacious verses. And the *Son Arribeño*, which reigns in the highlands of Guanajuato, the northern region of the state of Querétaro and parts of San Luis Potosí, excels in poetic art. No other part of the country has such a tradition of folk poets, peasant poets.

In recent years an interesting new phenomenon has developed in the communities where the *Son Arribeño* is practiced. Troubadours have gone beyond the traditional songs and themes handed down by their elders, and now address themselves to contemporary issues: the high cost of living, the financial crisis, the foreign debt — here and now subjects that are of common concern. Naturally, migration to the north and the situation of undocumented workers are dealt with extensively.

The following songs were written by Guillermo Velázquez and the *Leones de la Sierra de Xichú*, who together with other poets and musicians in the region have formed the *Taller de Huapango² y Poesía Campesina* (The Huapango and Peasant Poetry Workshop). The Workshop functions in the small Guanajuato town of Xichú, but its influence is felt throughout a vast region.

These songs help shed light on the thinking of Mexican peasants concerning their work as wetbacks and the adventure of going north.

¹ The area encompassing parts of San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, Tamaulipas and Veracruz, inhabited by *huasteca* indians.

² From the indian word *huapango*, meaning to dance on a stand or platform. ★

Duel of Poets

People come to a *Son Arribeño fiesta* not only to dance, but also to listen to the poets who are part of each musical group. In what amounts to poetic dueling, the poet-musicians take turns displaying their art. The traditional *fiesta* always has two clearly defined parts to it. One is a face to face match between two well-known poets, in what is called a *Topada de Fundamento*. For several hours they will exchange verses on serious matters, while at the same time welcoming the guests and singing songs suited to the occasion: if it's an Independence Day celebration, for example, they will sing of history, but at a wedding the poets may sing of the mysteries of birth and creation and of the difficulties the new couple will encounter. After midnight two younger poets take the place of their more expert elders and match off against each other with lighter verse, loaded with

double entendre, making fun of each other as they entertain the party-goers.

The *fiesta* lasts all night and usually ends at nine or ten o'clock the next morning. The poet who has shown the most physical stamina and the greatest capacity to improvise in verse is acclaimed by the public, chosen the winner and showered with gifts and applause, while his sparring partner is whistled off the stage. On rare occasions the duel may be carried on beyond the party, but usually both poets and musicians are asked to breakfast by their hosts in order to discuss and review the night's musical session.

Making people happy is what it's all about, and throughout the region these traditional *fiestas* are still preferred to more modern ones with bands that play urban-style music, which also exist in the area.



Son Arribeño musicians' stage, Guanajuato.

The United States

Its prosperous dollar and its satisfaction the stream of inventions in the U.S.A. are due mostly to the great exploitation of our dominated countries today.

Today's gringos have not always been on the lands they are living on now from Europe they came many years ago and this history books tell us so. They were immigrants, people from elsewhere, who came seeking new living conditions, and the Sioux and Cherokee the Navajo and Comanche were the natives who lived here long ago.

Through astuteness and sheer bloody wars the Saxons did put down their roots with their rifles they kill as they shoot native Indians beyond any count.

Through the forces of fraud and of violence they took over all of that extension and once masters of the situation they began the work of development. Everything has roots and a meaning:

For all the things that had to be done a workforce was what was needed so they picked a piece out of Africa and brought over thousands of slaves. Thus millions of blacks came to be the support of the whites in production.

Throughout the endless cotton fields the blacks sought relief from their suffering singing sad songs that sprang from their souls.

And after the blacks came the Chinese as the new wave of suffering cheap labor. By the 1900's, the story goes, there were Yugoslavs, Turks and Filipinos Italians, Persians and Latinos. All gave their effort to the nation and I say this without even a mention of our countries that at this very moment are enslaved to this imperialism.

In eighteen hundred forty seven when they stole so much of our land many Mexicans, evidently changed nations because of that stand. But it was early on in the age of rockets that our migration did start; revolution broke out and spread many peasants set out for the north and since then we all go back and forth.

This was when those gringos up there realized that for picking and watering right next door there were many strong arms so they made us a part of their work force. Thank the dollar and our sweat for the region's great productivity. Now they want to slam the door in our face with Congress' Simpson-Rodino This is the time to bring all this to mind.

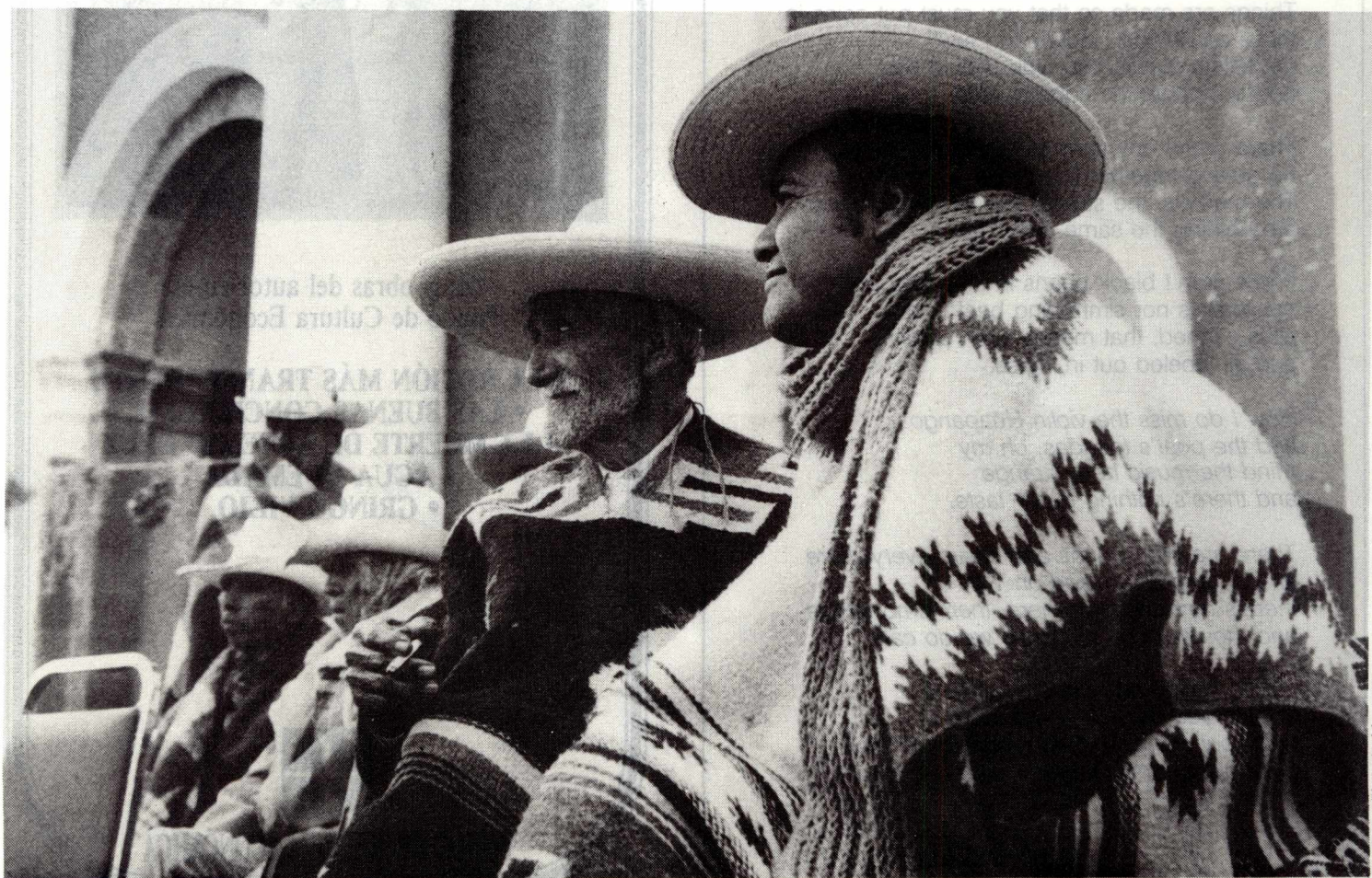


Photo by Ricardo Montejano.

Poet Francisco Berrones with composer Guillermo Velázquez in Xichú, Guanajuato.

A Letter From Petra

Mommy dearest, I send you this letter hoping that it may find you all well, my brothers and sisters, my father. I, thank God, find myself in good health.

I'm not yet used to this situation and it's only a month since I came. All day long I must try to ignore jokes and talking in English, a shame:

My employers are really good people of them I can have no complaint. But as soon as I think of our *rancho* tears start flowing without a restraint.

How I miss my milieu and my hills, miss my home and the land that surrounds it, with its hens and its chickens and dogs and the mornings I'd go off awashing.

Everything around here is so different and entirely a sight to be seen how the people walk around like crazy full of anguish in their shopping spree.

Things up here are really quite lovely, but really, Ma, nothing compares to going to the well to fetch water, how I do miss my life back there:

Things are made so that you must put coins in these are things... how can I say! out falls a plastic cup, you should see and out pours the coke or *café*.

There aren't any stalls to buy sodas no getting together like there. The markets, the streets and the playgrounds are nothing the same, Ma, I swear:

There aren't black beans in their clay pot nor tortillas nor simmering beef broth all is canned, that means even onions, and all labeled out in *inglés*.

How I do miss the violin Huapango and the poet's topadas, oh my I find the music here strange and there's nothing to my taste.

There are Woolworths and Sears everywhere and people all hooked on TV there's no dances up here, there's no fiestas and though poor, for those we do care.

I'm enclosing one hundred dollars to help you out somehow, mamá and your Petra who will never forget you is saying goodby to you now.

CARLOS FUENTES CRISTÓBAL NONATO

Crónica imaginaria y feroz del futuro tiempo mexicano, *Cristóbal Nonato* es una muestra mayor de la consistencia que con Carlos Fuentes han alcanzado las letras mexicanas.



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