

History through Musical Stories by Arizona's Young *Corrido* Composers

Luis E. Coronado Guel*



Art on the fence located at the overpass at 6th Avenue and the I-10. South Tucson, Arizona.

*Como la corriente de un río crecido
Que baja en torrente, impetuoso y bravío
Voz de nuestra gente, grito reprimido
Un canto valiente, eso es el corrido.*

*(Like the current of a swollen river
streaming down, impetuous and ferocious,
Voice of our people, repressed cry,
A valient song, that is the corrido.)*

*El corrido, performed by
Los Tigres del Norte¹*

Sylvana Acuña, a sixteen-year-old high school student from northern Tucson, won first place at the 2011 Bilingual *Corrido* Contest organized annually by the University of Arizona Poetry Center. Her *corrido* was dedicated to her personal hero's memory: her grandfather, who lived and died bravely struggling against leukemia. At first glance, this *corrido* bears no resemblance to those that tell bizarre stories about drug smuggling or mass killings, or that narrate the epic battles of the Mexican Revolution. *El corrido de Heriberto Acuña*, however, represents a people's aim of expressing feelings and beliefs: the universal human yearning for creating a memory and leaving a legacy. When in the 1960s historian Luis González wrote his masterpiece *Pueblo en vilo*

(Expectant Town),² many traditional historians mocked him as he proclaimed he had written the "universal history" of his little hometown, San José de Gracia, Michoacán. Unlike traditional historians, González's great contribution was to be willing to recover the forgotten stories that happened to common people in a town situated far from "broader" national history. The *corrido* has that very same function in everyday life for common people; it is a central feature of Mexico's popular culture and a legacy made up of musical stories. This article explores how today *corridos* represent a way in which music becomes an intangible cultural heritage that surpasses borders, languages, communities, and even generations.

The *corrido* has a long history in Mexico. According to Vicente T. Mendoza, the medieval romance is not only the precursor of the *corrido*; it was a *corrido* itself in archaic form.³ Yolanda Moreno Rivas argues that Bernal Díaz del Castillo made reference to traditional romances that the conquista-

* Research associate, Mexico Initiatives, College of Social and Behavioral Science at the University of Arizona; luisguel@email.arizona.edu.

Photos courtesy of the author.

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dors brought from Europe in his *True History of the Conquest*.⁴ Some debate exists, however, as to whether the *corrido* — practically as we know it today— began in the seventeenth century or just at the start of the national period around 1810.⁵ *Corridos* have been composed about practically every imaginable topic, on every level: individual, local, regional, national, or even international. *Corridistas* have written about many historical events and figures like Benito Juárez, Porfirio Díaz, Venustiano Carranza, Luis Donaldo Colosio, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, Michael Jackson, and even Osama Bin Laden. Nowadays, probably the two most prolific and well-known varieties of *corridos* are those that came out of the Revolution and those that emerge from the realm of drug trafficking.

The two classic approaches to defining the *corrido* were developed by Vicente T. Mendoza and Américo Paredes.⁶ The former defines it as a narrative in the first or the third person that usually flows from the beginning to the end from the lips of an eyewitness or a well-informed narrator.⁷ Paredes says that Mexicans call *corrido* their narrative songs, especially those with epic themes. They take this name from the verb *correr*, which means “to run.”⁸ According to Rosa Virginia Sánchez García, the *corrido* is simply a form of the great lyrical and musical tradition of Mexico that belongs to a specific musical lyrical-narrative system.⁹ It is basically a narration of facts that follows specific metrics and is generally written in the third or first person and attributed to an implicit witness of those facts.

Celestino Fernández argues that the *corrido* is part of Mexico’s oral tradition,¹⁰ but he observes that it has become a source of expression outside the country, too. Today it is known and performed wherever Mexicans and Mexican-Americans reside, including the U.S., particularly its southern border region. Fernández also argues that the *corrido*’s broader audiences come from the working class which he calls colloquially “el pueblo” (the people), while Maribel Ál-



Monument to Pancho Villa located at Veinte de Agosto Park, donated by President López Portillo to the state of Arizona on June 30, 1981. Congress Street and W. Broadway Blvd. in Tucson.

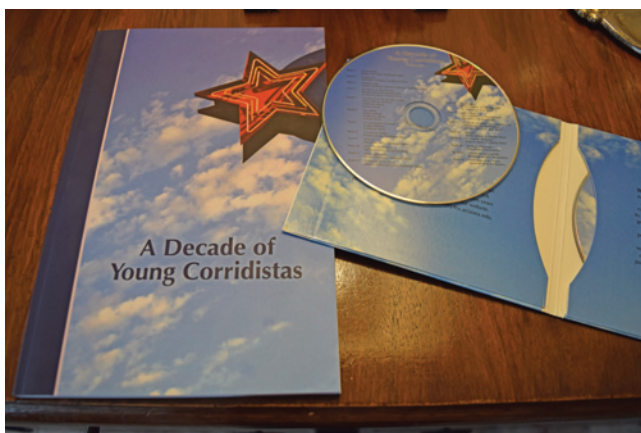
varez suggests that at the U.S.-Mexico border region, *corridos* are more than just songs; they are cultural artifacts. She writes, “They are social events rich in symbolism that lend themselves to a wide range of adaptations and appropriations by people with a variety of interests.”¹¹ Both Álvarez and Fernández stress the cultural significance of *corridos* as people’s stories. Fernández, however, says the *corrido*’s popularity is based on its narrative dimension, while Álvarez thinks it relies on its performative and cultural implications in everyday life. None of them mention its connection to the larger field of history, and to the instinctive human aim of leaving behind or creating memories.

Contrasting the concepts of history and memory illuminates the *corrido*’s most powerful cultural feature, which is its personal and emotional character.¹² Memory resembles more a personal attachment to the past, while history may be considered a more systematic, methodical, collective, and many times more controlled way to describe the past detached from personal feelings, fears, aspirations, and sentiments. This author considers the *corrido* essentially a commemorative act, which expresses feelings and thoughts in music and/or poetry, which may usually be consistent in terms of style and meter. This dimension of the *corrido* is what makes it so transcendent; it is more powerful than any other traditional, stylistic, or classification constraint of this musical genre. A *corrido* claims to be about true stories,¹³ and sometimes these tales allow people to deal with their past in a more human way than traditional written history. The evolution of *corridos* outside Mexico highlights the everyday dimension that creates connections rather than separation among bi-national or translational communities.

ARIZONA'S YOUNG *CORRIDISTAS*: EVERYONE IS ENDOWED WITH A MEMORABLE PAST

The transnational and trans-generational value of the *corrido* can be exemplified among younger amateur composers in the city of Tucson, Arizona, a proudly diverse community. The town itself is a prime example of multicultural roots and the transnational formation of communities. Located 60 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border, the Tucson Valley sits on the last piece of territory Mexico lost in 1853 by selling it to the U.S. government. In fact, Tucson's historical formation reflects its unique character as a translational community, with a vibrant personality equally proud of its Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. American roots. This exciting mixture is evident in its cuisine, music, art, and urban design.

From 2000 to 2015, the Poetry Center,¹⁴ a literary institution based at the University of Arizona, organized a *corrido* contest among teenagers from the area. The High-School *Corrido* Contest was a state-wide competition for students to write original *corrido* lyrics for a chance to win cash prizes. Although the center no longer organizes this annual contest, they archived all the 15 years of rich production to preserve the material as part of Tucson's cultural heritage. In 2010 a group of scholars published an anthology of contest materials under the title of *A Decade of Young Corridistas: 2000-2010*,¹⁵ which includes the lyrics of contest-winning *corridos* written by Arizona students. These lyrics demonstrate the aforementioned human universal aim of leaving memories behind. In a 2011 interview, Jesús Hurtado Terán, the second-place winner of the 2011 Bilingual *Corrido* Contest, said a *corrido* is personally meaningful because “it tells a story that may happen at any time —past, present, or fu-



A Decade of Young Corridistas anthology and CD.



Mural at 485 N. 7th Avenue, Tucson.

ture—, and you can learn from it.”¹⁶ As we can see, a *corrido* is their ultimate opportunity to leave a good or a learnable memory for others.

Social memory is constructed through *corridos*, whether they are the officially sanctioned *corridos revolucionarios*, those of black-label *narcocorridos*, or those written by young students in Tucson. This is because *corridos* are one of the everyday ways that common people construct history. They are especially recognized as an expression of the truth that also grants voices to those without access to expressing themselves openly and freely, or simply, to those who are invisible among larger groups. These characteristics make *corridos* tremendously flexible, as they appeal to the universal human values of surviving, resisting, struggling, and expressing whatever is personally and emotionally genuine.

The “young Arizonan *corridista*” lyrics seem like tools for managing their past and for conveying their ideals about the people around them. They do not just narrate specific events; they refer to and reframe reality within feelings and perceptions that aim for plausibility, but also judgments. These lyrics seem to be consistent with basic principles of honor and personal values, so sometimes not all social groups accept them, as in the case of *narcocorridos*. In fact, this does not mean that *narcocorridos* have no values or sense of honor, but rather quite the opposite. The *corridos* are genuine because they are consistent not with a universal set of human

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values, but with a universal human proclivity to live under specific values. Singing a *corrido* in many ways is personally and collectively a claim by people to define and defend their right to choose their own values.

An example of this is the construction of heroes or anti-heroes; in the *corridos*, we see how heroism is built on personal appreciations and idealizations of facts, people, conditions, or situations. In the *corrido* by Jesús Alan Hurtado Terán, the second-place winner of the 2011 contest, we can see he is narrating how his father abandoned their family some years before and never returned. But far from feeling rancor, the author attributes this event to God’s will and idealizes memories of his father. Thus, creating this *corrido* helped him build a better, more manageable past, as we can appreciate from the lyrics below:

Spanish Version
<p>El trabajo se le fue Sólo su miseria abrigó En busca de su futuro Huyó para estar seguro (...)</p> <p>Qué falta me hace mi padre A cada paso que doy Qué falta me hace mi padre Ya mi Dios se lo llevó.</p>
English Version
<p>He lost his job, His misery was the only shelter In search of a better future He ran away to be safe. ...</p> <p>I miss my father so much, Every step I take, I miss my father so much, Now my God took him away from me.</p>

This feature is also perceived in the *corrido* “Amargo trago” (Bitter Drink): a title that has a double meaning, in Spanish “trago amargo” is a metaphor used to express a hard event that one must swallow quickly to get it over with, like the death

of a loved one. In this case, authors Lizette Mendivil and Gabriela Contreras, the first-place winners in the 2000 *Corrido* Contest, narrate the death of their father who died because he drove under the influence of alcohol:

Spanish Version
<p>El veinticinco de octubre del año 97 Les contaré una tragedia Que yo la traigo presente</p> <p>El Sr. Efraín Mendivil Se mató en su camioneta A las dos de la mañana</p> <p>Fue a buscar unas cervezas Junto con dos compañeros Señores, qué gran tristeza Encontró luego la muerte Después de su borrachera (...)</p> <p>Sus familiares y amigos Pasan un gran dolor Pues este señor tenía Muy grandote el corazón¹⁷</p>
English Version
<p>October 25, of the year '97, I'll tell you about a tragedy That I always have in my mind. Mr. Efraín Mendivil Killed himself in his truck At two o'clock in the morning. He went to get some beers With two of his friends. Gentlemen, how sad, He met death that day Because of his drunkenness ...</p> <p>His family and friends Are in great pain Because this gentleman had A very big heart.</p>



Artwork by Chris Rush on 15th Street and Cherry Avenue, Tucson.

The musical dimension of these Arizona *corridos* also shows how these compositions transcend regardless of the rhythm, style, or instrumentation they are performed in. The organizers of the Annual Bilingual *Corrido* Contest used to grant the winners the opportunity of having professional musicians put their compositions to music. In 2011 and other years, musicians were not specialized in traditional mariachi or *norteño* styles, so the final musicalized versions sounded different from any other kind of *corrido* in Mexico. These *corridos*, however, kept all their emotional and commemorative spirit, regardless of whether they were performed in country style, jazz, or as a pop ballad. This adaptation shows the *corrido*'s enormous discursive strength and flexibility and confirms its potential for creating memory.



Tile artwork located at 6th Avenue & 26 Street, Tucson.

In summary, young Arizonan composers portray how *corridos* form a transnational and intangible heritage. Like elsewhere, *corridos* are cultural artifacts that people use for expressing their own feelings and beliefs. They often repre-

sent popular notions of justice, truth, and wisdom. A *corrido* is essentially a commemorative act, a last opportunity for anyone to be remembered or just recall something significant or ordinary, bad or good. This personal dimension makes it extremely powerful and long-lasting in time and space. That way, *corridos* can be carried beyond borders, languages, and musical styles. They are about people dreaming of being remembered in a good and gentle way; about people remembering an unfortunate past that is better in their imagination; they are about people exaggerating little victories, celebrating good and bad times, people who forget their bad past, and hope for a new future. *Corridos* are for people who, no matter age, race, condition, nationality, or language, turn their own stories into their own universal history. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Los Tigres del Norte, *Corridos prohibidos* (Mexico City: Fonovisa, 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAfgHMGwIO8>.
- ² Luis González y González, *Pueblo en vilo, microhistoria de San José de Gracia* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1968).
- ³ Vicente T. Mendoza, *El corrido mexicano* (Mexico City: FCE, 1974), p. x.
- ⁴ Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la música popular mexicana* (Mexico City: Océano, 2008), p. 32.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ James S. Griffith and Celestino Fernández, "Mexican Horse Races and Cultural Values: The Case of 'Los Corridos del Merino,'" *Western Folklore* vol. 47, no. 2, April 1988, p. 129.
- ⁷ Mendoza, *op. cit.*
- ⁸ Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Austin: Texas Classics, 1958).
- ⁹ Rosa Virginia Sánchez García, "Los principales géneros líricos en la música tradicional de México," in Aurelio Tello, ed., *La música en México. Panorama del siglo XX* (Mexico City: FCE/Conaculta, 2010), p. 108.
- ¹⁰ Celestino Fernández, "Corridos: Stories of the People," in Frances Sjoberg, Celestino Fernández, and Maribel L. Álvarez, eds., *A Decade of Young Corridistas, 2000-2010* (Tucson: University of Arizona Poetry Center, 2010), p. 10.
- ¹¹ Maribel Álvarez, "The *Corrido* as Cultural Artifact," in Frances Sjoberg, Celestino Fernández, and Maribel L. Álvarez, eds., *A Decade of Young Corridistas, 2000-2010* (Tucson: University of Arizona Poetry Center, 2010), p. 15.
- ¹² For scholarship on memory see Jeffrey K. Olik and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 24 (1998), pp. 105-140.
- ¹³ José Pablo Villalobos and Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, "*Corridos* and *la pura verdad*: Myths and Realities of the Mexican Ballad," *South Central Review* vol. 21, no. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 129-149.
- ¹⁴ Poetry Center, "About the Poetry Center," November 19, 2015, <http://poetry.arizona.edu/visit/about-poetry-center>.
- ¹⁵ Frances Sjoberg, Celestino Fernández, and Maribel L. Álvarez, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ Jesús Alan Hurtado Terán, interview by the author, Tucson, Arizona, April 2, 2011.
- ¹⁷ Lizette Mendivil and Gabriela Contreras, *Amargo trago* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Poetry Center, 2010), p. 32.