

Melodies with a message target would-be immigrants

By Hernán Rozemberg - Express-News

The song tells the all-too-familiar tale of two young men whose attempt to illegally cross the U.S.-Mexico border ends tragically with death.

"El Mas Grande Enemigo," The Biggest Enemy, opens with toe-tapping accordions, but the lyrics about Abelardo and his cousin Rafael are anything but cheerful:

After some hours/Abelardo opened his eyes/And in the middle of the cold night/Discovered his dead cousin at his side.

While Mexican drug traffickers long have had storytelling ballads known as *narcocorridos* to tell of their violent exploits, the Border Patrol now has *migra corridos* that sing of the danger immigrants face when crossing the border illegally.

What Mexican listeners don't know is that the *migra corridos* are the U.S. government's latest effort to convince migrants to stay home.

The Border Patrol is taking ownership of the word "*migra*" — a derogatory label traditionally used by illegal border crossers to describe the U.S. agency — as well as the popular folk song format to produce a five-song CD solely distributed to Mexican radio stations.

"We're as much law enforcers as we're rescuers and medical providers," said Wendi Lee, an agency spokeswoman in Washington. "The purpose of these songs is to educate and save lives."

For nearly a century, the agency's mission has focused on flexing its law enforcement muscle to halt illegal border incursions, but over the past decade, it has conducted a softer, lesser-known campaign to dissuade migrants from trying to cross in the first place.

The "Border Safety Initiative" created new units of medically trained agents, now totaling 212 who are spread along the Mexican border, assigned to search-and-rescue missions for stranded immigrants, particularly in the deadly Arizona desert.

The BSI campaign ushered a series of public service announcements — dubbed "*No Más Cruces*," which means both "No More Crossings" and "No More Crosses" — meant to make people think twice before heading north.

The effort has paid off, Lee noted, pointing to the steady decline in crossing deaths from a record high of 492 in 2005 to 390 last year.

The *migra corridos* are the latest version of these ads, though you wouldn't know by looking at the CD jacket that it's paid for by the U.S. Border Patrol.

The funding source was kept secret because the agency feared losing Mexican listeners if they discovered *la migra* was behind the message.

The songs are of harrowing border-crossing stories, from Rafael and Abelardo's failed desert trek to a mother raped and beaten by a smuggler who then kills her 6-year-old daughter, and another of a migrant suffocating to death in an airtight tractor-trailer:

To cross the border/He put me in a trailer box/There I shared my suffering/With another 40 immigrants/I was never told/This was a trip to hell.

The point of the *migra corridos* is to take the awareness campaign to the street level, right into peoples' homes, said Jimmy Learned, president of Elevación, the Hispanic ad agency with offices in Washington and New York that has spearheaded the Border Patrol's campaign for seven years.

The agency declined to disclose how much it's spending on the campaign, or the cost to produce and distribute the CD.

Learned said he conducted research in Mexico before deciding to target 25 radio stations in six states with the highest count of U.S.-bound emigres. Next up: Central American countries.

The stations initially played snippets of the songs as part of warning ads by the Mexican government, but the unique lyrics struck a chord with people who began asking stations for the full version, Learned said.

One station continued running the government spots during the day but then played the whole songs during a night *corridos* show.

The songs simply hit home with listeners keenly aware of risky border-crossing experiences, either personally or through friends and relatives, said José Gasca, manager of *La Zeta* station in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, a traditional migrant-sending state.

In Zacatecas, another leading emigre state, another station administrator wished Learned would have sent him the *migra corridos*, saying his listeners would have reacted like those at Gasca's station.

"Are you kidding me? Everybody around here has family up north," said Juan Suárez, programming director at *La Grupera Super G*, who has many relatives in Los Angeles. "We all know plenty of stories of people that tried to cross the border — those that failed and those that triumphed."

But Gasca, who didn't know Elevación works for the Border Patrol, said his listeners would have wanted nothing to do with the songs if they knew of the agency's involvement — they'd feel as if *la migra* was after them in their own country.

The Border Patrol and Elevación agreed, saying that's why they kept the agency's name out of it.

"A lot of people thought the Mexican government was behind it — the last thing we wanted was to put 'paid by la migra,'" explained Learned, noting two new *migra corridos* will be released in April. "What's most important is that if we've made people think twice, we've succeeded."

Perhaps they were from Uriangato/Maybe they were from Morelia/Esperanza was six/Carmela was her mother/They were looking for her father/On the north side of the border.