

Crossover Appeal

Advertisement

South of the Border, Popular Ballads About the Perils of Illegal Immigration Have a Surprising Heritage: Made in -- and by -- the United States of America

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To its arsenal of agents, fences and stealthy sensors skirting our nation's southern border, the U.S. Border Patrol may soon add another weapon in the fight against illegal immigration: a follow-up album.

Yes, as in CD. With singers, guitars. Accordions.

In what may be among the lesser-known deterrents exercised by our nation's security forces, the Border Patrol is deploying up-tempo Mexican folk songs about tragic border crossings to dissuade would-be illegal immigrants. The agency has paid -- how much, it won't say -- a D.C.-based advertising company to write, record and distribute an album, "Migra Corridos," to radio stations in Mexico. Its title, its makers say, is intended to mean "songs of the immigrant" but "migras" is commonly understood as a code word for Border Patrol in much of Mexico.

The first CD of five songs was recorded in 2006 and distributed over the past two years. Another CD in the works is scheduled to be ready by May. There are also tentative plans for a collection of similarly themed songs with styles of music more geared toward would-be illegal immigrants from Central America.

Many of the stations in Mexico that play the songs and the listeners who request them are seemingly oblivious to who is behind the bouncy ballads of death, dashed dreams and futile attempts at manhood.

Before you cross the border, remember that you can be just as much a man by chickening out and staying

Because it's better to keep your life than ending up dead.

-- "Veinte Años" ("20 Years")

"It's pretty slick," says Jason Ciliberti, a spokesman with the Border Patrol in Washington.

The music is part of the Border Safety Initiative, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's push to squash smuggling and increase safety along the border. As part of that effort, the Border Patrol launched "No Mas Cruces en la Frontera," a campaign aimed at educating communities with many potential illegal immigrants about the dangers of crossing.

Illegal immigrants can encounter severe hazards on their journey: professional smugglers and bandits who beat, rob, rape and abandon them; biting cold or scorching temperatures; snakes, scorpions; drowning; and death by dehydration or exhaustion.

"No Mas Cruces en la Frontera" (which means both "no more crossings on the border" and "no more crosses on the border") has primarily relied on newspaper, television and billboard ads. In one poster, men walk in a line, with some of their shadows showing as crosses rather than bodies. In another, someone has collapsed in a seemingly endless desert. "Before crossing to the other side," the poster advises, "remember that the burial plots are full of the valiant and the macho."

The most recent twist on the media blitz is "Migra Corridos," a brainchild of Elevación, a D.C.-based advertising boutique with 20 or so employees that specializes in Hispanic market advertising -- producing jingles, television spots and billboards. Elevación, which had already been working on the border campaign, sold the Border Patrol on the idea of songs-as-deterrents.

The five-song album draws on corridos, popular Mexican narrative ballads with roots in Spain's Middle Ages. Reenergized in recent decades by such popular Mexican groups as Los Tigres del Norte, the genre reverberates deeply with Mexican and Mexican American communities, says Martha I. Chew Sanchez, the author of "Corridos in Migrant Memory" and an associate professor at St. Lawrence University in New York.

The songs, Sanchez says, humanize the experiences of those communities with tales of love, death, migration, globalization and social and political events. More recently, there has been an explosion in the popularity of narcocorridos -- ballads that recount the drug traders, their violent exploits and, often, their deaths.

Among the perils mentioned on "Migra Corridos": a cousin who dies from dehydration, a mother who is raped and beaten by a child-killing smuggler, one man's suffocation in an airtight tractor-trailer.

He put me in a trailer

There I shared my sorrows

With 40 illegals

They never told me

That this was a trip to hell.

-- *"El Respeto" ("Respect")*

Whatever the subject, the songs can strike a chord with listeners, as long as they tell a compelling narrative, Sanchez says. "If it's a good story, the people will like it. And no matter what generation, they will listen to it, dance to it."

"Migra Corridos" lives up to its dance-inducing predecessors, despite its somber stories. The music is peppy, even cheerful. Drums tippity-tap along with piping accordions and strumming guitars.

The songs were distributed to six Mexican states, where, according to Elevación's research, many migrants left for the border: Zacatecas, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco and Chiapas. Elevación contacted stations and asked them to play the songs as part of the border initiative.

"When we approached the Mexican media, we approach it as a humanitarian campaign," says Pablo Izquierdo, vice president of Elevación. "We didn't tell them who was behind it because consumer research indicated that it wasn't going to be as well-received."

But, Izquierdo says, there's nothing fake about the songs. "There is no commercial message. It's all heartfelt, and it's all from the point of view of the people."

After some hours

Abelardo opened his eyes

And in the middle of the cold night

Discovered his dead cousin at his side.

-- *"El Más Grande Enemigo"*

("The Biggest Enemy")

Izquierdo says that feedback from the stations was positive and that even though the CDs were not for sale, listeners started requesting the songs. Research done by Elevación in the communities where the songs were being played found that the songs became "the talk of the town," Izquierdo says.

It is difficult to measure how effective the corridos have been in aiding the government's overall effort, but the Border Patrol's Ciliberti cites a steady decline in deaths and rescues along the Southwest border over the past four years. He attributes it to the agency's broader approach to illegal immigration. According to Ciliberti, 492 people died along the Southwest border in 2005. Last year, 390 deaths were recorded. In terms of rescues in that same area, the Border Patrol assisted 2,550 people in distress in 2005. Last year, 1,263 were rescued.

"What we're doing now, that we really haven't done before, is take a more holistic view of border security," he says. "There's no mention of being punitive in any of these corridos. These are simply about the dangers."

But whatever its intent, the program raises questions about whether the Border Patrol should be doing this at all. The United States has long used music, art and other forms of cultural diplomacy as a way of reaching and influencing people in other countries, but those efforts have been relatively out in the open. The Border Patrol's involvement is not mentioned, nor is it traceable on the brown glossy CD cover with "migra corridos" printed in gold. More-discerning eyes might notice "bsi" (for Border Safety Initiative) at the bottom right-hand corner inside the cover.

Still, the agency defends the approach despite the lack of transparency.

"I think the message we're putting out is real, and it's a message that needs to be heard," says Steve Cribby, also with the Border Patrol. "Whether people decide to hear it or not is up to them. We're not making anything up. We're educating people."

Juan Flores, a drummer in a Stockton, Calif.-based band that plays corridos, says the Border Patrol's approach is a smart one. "They are thinking outside the box," he says. "It's propaganda, in a good way."

A number of the professional writers, musicians and singers for the "Migra Corridos" project are Mexican nationals now living in Washington and New York. And all were aware of Border Patrol's involvement -- and concealment -- in the project.

Rodolfo Hernández, who works for Elevación, wrote the lyrics for the corridos, inspired by newspaper clippings. He said any initial hesitation among the musicians was eased knowing the CD's release would benefit their country. "Mexico is suffering a lot," says Hernández, 35. "The effect of immigration is not just what happens at the border, it's what we leave behind."

And the backing of Border Patrol didn't give pause to New York-based Rubén Flores, who sang two of the tracks on the CD: "En la Raya" and "Veinte Años."

"I thought it was a smart thing to do, to have that kind of approach," says Flores, who once sang for a popular musical comedy show in Mexico. To those in his native country who might feel deceived by the project, Flores says, "I would like them to think of their parents, their brothers and sisters -- the people who are left behind if somebody dies -- and how they would feel," he says.

"I would say that if they really listen to the lyrics and what the song is about, that is the most important thing," he says. "It wouldn't be important where the message is coming from, but the essence."

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