

## **Celebrating Robin Hood in Modern Border Ballads**

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**Abstract:** *This article undertakes an analysis of an original folk ballad known as a “narcocorrido” which is a genre with roots along the Texas border but whose popularity spans the entire country. The protagonist is Mexican or Mexican-American and very much like Robin Hood as these odes have a strong cultural impact. These ballads serve to entertain and they also educate the public about criminality as narcocorridos carry a strong moral message especially for the young.*

**Key Words:** *folk ballad, narcocorrido, Robin Hood, drug traffickers, drug seizures*

### **1. Introduction**

The modern day version of Robin Hood has a Mexican protagonist and his exploits are contained in musical tales called “corridos” yet the details of these songs are near identical to the well-known legend of old. An impoverished young man turns to crime out of desperation, that he makes a living trafficking drugs only adds to his luster and myth-appeal for the people of South Texas. This Mexican Robin Hood takes from the rich, outwits the Border Patrol, has more weapons than U.S. Customs, and can run circles around the DEA. Yet, these story songs also inform the listener about the harsh realities of drug dealing and usage and the tragic end that is predestined. The National Institute on Drug Abuse has conservatively estimated that illegal

drugs account for \$110 billion in revenue yet 50,000 drug-related deaths occur each year estimates the Office of National Drug Control Policy (2013) in their Drug Data Summary. Every part of our society is affected. The Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Use (2013) has reported that 34% of Texas students in grades 7th through 12th have admitted to using illicit drugs. But, who reads the statistics? Yet people do listen to music and narcocorridos are very popular. The narcocorridos serve to provide invaluable cultural impact as they are used to entertain, to educate listeners about drugs and a criminal lifestyle, and they offer moral guidance in the form of modern legends.

While the legend of Robin Hood has been around since medieval times it continues to hold the attention of young and old alike. Notable historical authorities such as David Baldwin (2013) and John W. Walker (1973) are in agreement that Robin Hood did exist and that the main features of the tale are based on documentary evidence. Robin Hood can be said to be the most memorable figure in the history of medieval England and he continues to live in nursery and elementary school classrooms around the globe. The tale is one that is well-known but let us review the main elements: Robin Hood while hunting on the King's land is caught poaching game yet his major offense is hunger. Having been branded a thief he turns to becoming a highway man who leads a band of merry men and takes on the profession of robbing the rich and giving to the poor. This is quite a tale, one that exalts the travails of the poor and its telling gives unfortunates a reason to smile and pump their fists in the air over the besting of their betters.

## **2. Robin Hood lives on in Corridos**

This tradition of storytelling lives on today. In South Texas, in particular, as well as in heavily Hispanic areas of the country one can turn on the radio and hear a modern day version of Robin Hood. But, this is a Hispanic version so the words are in Spanish but the message is near identical to the well-known tale of the medieval hero. In the Mexican version, a young boy is raised in grueling poverty and he is a firsthand witness to the injustices that the rich heap on the poor. His own family suffers as does his community and one day he vows to change his lot in life and raise himself and his family out of that poverty. He will be cunning and sly and outwit those men of power and take the fruits of the land long denied him and others like him. And, so is born a modern day Mexican Robin Hood. Some details must change because after all it is a modern tale, the King's land may be changed to the "King Ranch" but the basic idea remains. The land is not owned by the poor, they are merely squatters, renters, or transitory migrant farm workers who are at the mercy of the King (the landowner) and the King's men (the sheriff, the police, the agents from the Border Patrol, or from a host of state and federal criminal justice agencies). Barely eking out a living in the land of plenty is enough to enrage any noble heart, so the young Mexican man becomes a robber taking from the rich and giving to the poor and yes he helps himself along the way. It is only a short step from becoming a robber to becoming a drug trafficker but even so the poor view him as a hero, a modern day Mexican Robin Hood.

The daring deeds of such young Mexican men become fodder for the musical tales called "corridos" which commemorate their brave exploits. These corridos about drug trafficking were born along the U.S.-Mexican border and are embraced enthusiastically by young and old alike. Each song gives a brief history of an exploited young man

who manages to turn the tables on life circumstances and so change his fate. It matters little that the chosen route out of poverty is drug trafficking. The details that are highlighted are his bravery, his ability to overcome overwhelming odds, and his incredible cunning which enables him to outwit all of the King's men time and again. These corridos leave a smile on the faces of the Hispanic poor and are a good cause to dance and sing. Robin Hood has struck again. Hurrah!

### **3. The Roots of Corridos and the Birth of Narcocorridos**

Corridos are a staple of Mexican culture as their roots go back to the Spanish conquistadores in the 1500s that brought their romantic verses with them (Collier A2). In the 1800s the corridos told the tales of Mexican war heroes against the French and in the early 1900s the corridos glamorized the Mexican revolutionary generals, the great battles, and even the women who followed the soldiers notes Collier. Traveling minstrels have sung corridos for hundreds of years about assassinations, family feuds, daring bandits on horseback, accidents, and personal tales of love, betrayal, and revenge. Even today people on both sides of the border can commission a composer or "corridista" to write a song about their loved one in order to commemorate them.

The music is catchy and people enjoy singing the corridos and dancing to them as well. A writer for the San Francisco Chronicle described the music this way, "The tunes are sing-songy and repetitive, with a simple up and down cadence, a wheezy accordion and the vocalist's usually nasal whine" (Collier A2). The earliest known song about illicit substances was written in 1933 and tells the tale of 3 tequila smugglers who were killed by Texas Rangers during the time of Prohibition in the United States. This type of song was

unusual and did not become popular until 40 years later. It was in the 1970s that a new genre was born- the narcocorridos contends Collier. These ballads tell the tales of drug traffickers and emphasize their bravery, their daring, their disrespect for the law, their independence, their ill-gotten wealth, and their love for parents, family, friends, and homeland as well as their tragically short lives. The corridos follow the medieval style of the original Robin Hood tale yet they are as avant-garde as modern gangsta rap.

#### **4. Analysis of a Narcocorrido**

Despite the headlines and publicity on drug trafficking and the well-known impact of drug use in our society the corridos remain popular music among the Hispanic poor. To understand the allure of such songs one only has to examine the lyrics of a narcocorrido. The ballads follow a similar pattern as the opening refrain informs the listener they are about to hear the legend of a modern day Robin Hood and that his story will live forever. The refrains that follow tell the life story of an extraordinary man who had the courage to rise above humble origins to create his own kingdom. The listener is filled with outrage at the injustices suffered by the poor young man and feels a sense of pride that an impoverished individual can through bravery and cunning overcome tremendous odds. The ballad of course ends with the tragic demise of the hero for that is the fate of one who is larger than life and scoffs at the law.

The original song below was written by Mr. Arnulfo Medrano Sr. and is entitled "Corrido de Cipriano Torres." Mr. Medrano is from Roma, Texas and he is a composer of corridos and is often hired by locals to commemorate their loved ones. This original song was used with permission of the composer and it will be analyzed to better understand

the popularity of the corridos as an in-depth analysis will aid in the clarifying the various hidden messages contained within such musical tales. This ballad is typical of the narcocorridos that are so popular in Mexico and wherever you find Hispanics in the United States. Next to the original Spanish lyrics is an English translation.

### **Corrido de Cipriano Torres**

Cipriano Torres alias "El Pata"  
nacido de cuna pobre  
en el pueblo de Los Guerras  
creció y se fue haciendo hombre  
en todo México y Tejas ya se escuchaba su nombre.

Los judiciales lo respetaban  
agentes y comandantes  
protegían a Cipriano por su valor y desplantes  
era hombre de mil agallas  
como no se había visto antes.

A ese penal del Topochico en un mal día cayó  
Pero como tenía influencias  
el juez pruebas no le halló

tuvieron que dejarlo libre a su pueblito volvió.

Cuando salió del Topochico, como dos años pasaron  
secuestraron a su hijo, a José Luis se llevaron  
pagó quinientos mil dólares fue como lo rescataron.

that is how he rescued him.

Acompañado de dos amigos negocios iba arreglar  
volaron desde McAllen a Houston fueron a dar  
y en el cuarto de un hotel se fueron a descansar:  
pero Cipriano no imaginaba lo que ese día pasaría  
no pensó que en otro avión él ya muerto volvería,  
causándoles grandes penas a su pueblo y su familia.

Cipriano Torres alias "The Foot"  
from the cradle was born poor  
in the small town of Los Guerras  
he grew and became a man  
in all of Mexico and Texas  
people came to know his name.  
Law enforcement respected him  
agents and commanders  
protected Cipriano because of  
his valor and cavalier attitude  
he was a man of much courage  
like no one had seen before.

He went to jail in Topochico as  
one day he was arrested  
but because he had influence

the judge found no evidence against  
him so they had to let him go free  
and to his small town he returned.

After he got out of jail  
almost two years passed  
his son Jose Luis was kidnapped  
and taken he paid \$500,000 dollars

Accompanied by two friends  
on business he had to attend to  
they flew from McAllen to Houston  
and went to a hotel room to rest  
but Cipriano could not have  
imagined what would happen that  
day to him. He never thought that by  
Another plane and dead he would  
return home causing great sorrow to

Ya se nos fue un gran amigo	his town and his family.
que todos recordaremos	A great friend has left us
se acabaron esas fiestas	we will always remember him
donde no faltaba el dinero;	all those parties are over
ya murió Cipriano "El Pata"	at which money was plentiful
que Dios lo tenga en el cielo.	Cipriano "El Pata" is dead
	may God have him in heaven.

The "Corrido de Cipriano Torres" is true to form as the first stanza informs the listener he/she is about to hear the story of "El Pata" who was born to a poor family in the small town of Los Guerras but whose name became legend in Mexico and Texas by the time he was a man. This is a story song about a common man who was able to transform himself into a legend on both sides of the border. In the second stanza, the listener is told that law enforcement officials not only respected Cipriano but they protected him as well. His valor and cavalier attitude was admired by all. This stanza clearly tells the listener that Cipriano Torres lived as an outlaw and flaunted his criminal lifestyle. His bravery and cunning not only earned him the respect of his adversaries but their protection as well. In between the lines, it is understood that while some of the respect was earned by "El Pata's" exploits that some of it was bought. This Mexican Robin Hood was a man of great courage and "mil agallas" and such a man is rarely seen the corridista points out. The listener can only imagine the adventures of such a daring outlaw. The alias "El Pata" ("The Foot") was given to Cipriano who time and again was able to outwit the King's men and walk out of danger unharmed.

In stanza three, the listener learns that on a very bad day Cipriano was arrested and taken to the penal institution called Topochico but due to his great influence (an irresistible combination of charm and money) the judge ended up saying they had no evidence against him. They had

to let him go and Cipriano returned to his pueblo, a bigger hero than before. In stanza four, the listener learns that “El Pata” lived another two years of the good life after his release from jail then his son was kidnapped. Rescuing the boy cost Cipriano half-a-million dollars. This gives the listener a small inkling as to the type of business that Cipriano Torres was engaged in that he could afford to pay such a ransom. Embedded in the verse is the deeper message that ill-gotten gains will eventually cost you what you value most. Even after this traumatic episode, Cipriano goes to Houston with two friends to transact more “business”, just what this business entails the corridista never spells out but the listener knows. Cipriano never imagined that as he rested in his hotel room that was to be his last day. “El Pata” never guessed he would return to McAllen on another plane but that he would return dead causing his family and his whole town great sorrow. The composer does not reveal precisely what happened to Cipriano Torres. Was he betrayed by his friends? Was it a drug deal gone bad? Did the drug buyers outwit the brave and cavalier Cipriano? Did law enforcement agents get the better of the Mexican Robin Hood? The listener imagines the worst for the worst did happen, “El Pata” was killed.

In the final stanza, the corridista laments the passing of a great friend commenting that he will always be remembered. The fiestas are all over as is the never-ending supply of money which is also cause for lamentation. This stanza lets the listener know that Cipriano was fast and loose with his money. One can imagine “El Pata” serving as a great benefactor for his small town contributing to schools, hospitals, churches and other causes never failing to share the riches of his “business” as a good Mexican Robin Hood should. Cipriano “El Pata” is dead and people on both sides of the border hope he is in God’s care ends the corrido.



This narcocorrido exalts the life of a common man who through guile and boldness was able to wrest the good life for himself, his family, and his pueblo. He lived life on a grand scale sharing wealth derived from drug trafficking even though his lifestyle imperiled him at times and his beloved son as well. The ending is foreordained as the end is always the same in narcocorridos- the protagonist dies, often he is a victim of betrayal, sometimes his death comes at the hands of law enforcement but always it is a tragic end. In a narcocorrido, the drug trafficker is immortalized; his name and story live on in a modern legend. Embedded in such narcocorridos is the moral lesson that a criminal lifestyle will only end in sorrow. Entertainment and educational merit as well as a strong moral lesson are combined in the narcocorridos so the allure of such Mexican ballads is undeniable and understandable.

While the narcocorridos do romanticize the outlaw lifestyle, the moral of these modern legends make it poignantly clear that the Mexican Robin Hood can only end in tragedy. The individuals involved in drug trafficking lose their lives and leave a trail of devastation in their wake. Such a lifestyle has negative consequences for family members and friends alike. And, it also impacts larger society negatively. While the U.S fights to protect its borders and keep drugs out of this country the truth is that the Americans crave drugs and are among the largest consumers of illicit drugs. The United States consumes 60% of the entire world's drug supplies even though this nation only has 5% of the world's population points out James R. Brown in his 2002 book on drug diversion courts and these numbers are still supported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012).

## **5. Mexico's Ban on Narcocorridos**

While music is a cultural universal not all countries allow their citizens to listen to all types of music as restrictions vary from country to country. In 2013, it highlighted by U.S. Legal.com (“Music Censorship”) that Cole Porter in 1954 was not allowed to sing the line, “I get no kick from cocaine” and later Rosemary Clooney’s “Mambo Italiano” was cited by the American Broadcasting Company as lacking adequate standards for good taste. The censorship of music in the U.S. was later expanded to create the Parents Music Resource Center which eventually resulted in a ratings system for music. Lyrics that promote violence, use excessive profane language, contain explicit sexual references, or degrade women are given a Parental Advisory (PAL) label today as provided by the Recording Industry Association for audio records. This label PAL is also available in a number of other countries including Mexico. Yet, in 2009 Mexico decided that the PAL label was not enough to warn the public of the dangers of the musical genre known as narcocorridos and government officials took music censorship much further than a mere warning label (U.S. Legal.com “Music Censorship”). Mexican government officials pressured radio stations into not playing narcocorridos maintain Chris Summers and Dominic Bailey. While the Mexican Senate was unable to pass a law to completely ban narcocorridos because of freedom of speech legislation already in place, the Senators did exert considerable pressure on the Mexican states to accept a voluntary ban on this musical genre. The Mexican state of Sinaloa in 2001 announced a voluntary ban on narcocorridos on the radio and in 2002 Chihuahua bowed to the pressure. Other Mexican states have quickly followed suit explain Summers and Bailey.

Why would Mexico forbid these folk ballads and consider them dangerous enough to ban them from the radio? In

2013, President Nieto of Mexico told CNN journalist, Catherine Shoichet that the poor in his country lacked opportunities of any kind and so people turn to criminal activity to get out of poverty. President Nieto has created a new Mexican strategy which centers on creating jobs and social programs to deal with the poverty in the country and he has moved away to some extent from emphasizing combatting the drug cartels as aggressively as was the policy of his predecessor, President Felipe Calderon. What has been the impact of the Mexican government's war against the drug cartels and of the drug cartels war against each other in the battle for supremacy?

The Human Rights Watch estimated in 2013 that hundreds of thousands of people have been killed in the drug violence between the years 2006 and 2012. The U.S. Department's 2013 report to Congress entitled, "2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report" revealed that the U.S. has provided \$1.1 billion dollars in aid to Mexico since 2008 to combat drug trafficking contends Catherine Shoichet. The death tally in the drug wars continues unabated as experts challenged the official death toll of 47,515 revealed in January 2012 according to the New York journalist, Damien Cave. This number of deaths has been hotly disputed by U.S. government officials and experts like Erick Olson, a security expert at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. Mexican government officials had at first claimed they could not reveal the number of crime-related deaths for reasons of national security and repeatedly stalled both Mexican and American academics for the requested information. The Mexican government eventually released an estimate of 47,515 as being the number of Mexicans killed in the drug wars since 2006. This figure is an underestimate maintains the Human Rights Watch as they believe the number to be at

least 60,000 killed in the drug wars between the years 2006 to 2012.

Statistics may be boring but they reveal the extent of the human tragedy that results from drug trafficking. While the Human Rights Watch death toll number is only a rough estimate of the deaths in Mexico due to the drug cartel battles we have no real estimates of the total devastation on both sides of the border caused by drug addiction, loss of productivity, emergency room admissions due to drug overdoses, the amount of money spent on arrests and prosecution of drug dealers and drug users, the amount of money spent on drug interdiction, or an estimate of how drug trafficking generates violence and more crime, and of the total number of deaths.

Certainly the poor on both sides of the border are used as fodder to fuel the manpower needs of the drug cartels. Every man lost to the drug wars is soon easily replaced as every man dreams of success, of being able to rise above humble roots to make a mark on the world, and of being able to provide for his family, friends, and community in a substantial manner. Narcocorridos seduce the poor on both sides of the border who dream about “the good life” as drug trafficking offers a ready avenue to fulfill those dreams. Despite the musical inspiration of narcocorridos it is important to closely examine the boring statistics especially on this side of the border so Americans can better understand the dangers highlighted in these simple folk songs.

## **6. Drug Use on the National Level and in Texas**

The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse for 2012 reported that 42% of all Americans have used an illicit drug

at least once with marijuana being the most commonly used drug followed by amphetamines, then hallucinogens such as LSD, PCP, and MDMA reports the Office of National Drug Control Policy in their *Drug Data Summary* for 2013. Among teens we find a dangerous rise in the use of tobacco and alcohol which have been termed the “gateway” drugs that often lead to the use of more dangerous drugs such as cocaine argue Jeffrey Merrill et al. in their 1994 report. A study carried out by Columbia University’s Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that teens who smoke marijuana are eighty-five times more likely to move on to cocaine maintains the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Lloyd D. Johnson and his colleagues found in the Monitoring the Future Study in 2012 that the use of illicit drugs went up 150% from 1991 to 2011. While the prevalence of drug use is high it is still not as high as the levels experiences in the 1970s yet it is alarming that half of all high school students use illicit drugs by the time they turn eighteen years of age has lamented Johnson and his colleagues.

The Texas Commission of Alcohol and Drug Use in 2013 reported that 34% of all students grades 7-12 have used an illicit drug at some time and that 16% used a drug in the month prior to the study. The most popular drugs, in order of preference, for Texas secondary students are marijuana, inhalants, downers, and uppers. Drug use is often intertwined with criminal activity as evidenced by a finding that 84% of youths confined to the Texas Youth Center had used drugs in the year prior to their commitment noted Richard Allen Burns. Drug traffickers are well aware of the American appetite for illicit drugs and they have no trouble selling the wares they smuggle across the border. It matters little to them that so many people become addicted and that the young fall prey to the seduction of their wares.

## **7. Drug Seizures in the U.S. with Special Attention given Texas**

The numbers involved in the seizures of drugs on a national scale are dramatic. In 2012, a total of 2,412,315 pounds of marijuana was seized in the United States while 225,122 pounds of cocaine were confiscated as were 6,900 pounds of heroin according to the U.S Department of Homeland Security's report entitled *Southwest Border Points of Entry* for 2013. The amount of confiscated drugs is only a drop in the bucket as criminal justice professionals agree that the border is a sieve and large quantities of drugs pass over each day. Drug traffickers expect a certain amount of their wares to be seized and they see such confiscations as a simple hazard of their business.

Even on a county level the drug seizure statistics are staggering. The *Crime in McAllen 2012* report noted that 88,677 pounds of marijuana were seized in Hidalgo County by the Combined Governmental Drug Enforcement and Special Crimes Task Force while 3,103 grams of cocaine were seized as were 258 grams of black tar heroin among other drugs. Texas has 624 miles of coastline and 1,254 miles of international border which makes the State particularly vulnerable to drug traffickers. The border areas of the State simply cannot be monitored around-the-clock by criminal justice agencies. The Southwest border is 2,000 miles long and has 38 commercial and passenger ports besides the innumerable passible points by water craft or on foot as is noted by the Office of National Drug Control Policy in 2013. For the fiscal year 2012 alone, 3.4 million trucks, 84 million cars, and 232 million people came through the commercial and passenger ports yet not even an estimate is offered as to the number of illegal crossing made yearly. The heavy volume of legitimate border traffic also facilitates drug

smugglers. Drug traffickers commonly use commercial trucks and private vehicles to move their cargo. Texas is an especially attractive state for drug traffickers reports the National Drug Intelligence Center (2012) as besides the vehicle and human mule movement of drugs pilots fly into the state to use abandoned airstrips or isolated roads to unload their illicit wares. Drug traffickers use buses, trains, and package delivery services to move their wares into Texas for eventual distribution across the nation reveals the National Drug Intelligence Center.

The Federal-wide Drug Seizure System (FDSS) data reveal that most illicit drugs are seized at the borders of Texas and that these seizures are the largest of any other state noted the U.S Customs and Border Protection in 2012. The FDSS collects data on drug seizures made by the FBI, DEA, U.S Customs, U.S Border Patrol, and the U.S Coast Guard. Texas ranks first in the seizures for cocaine and marijuana and is second for the seizure of methamphetamines and is ranked third for the amount of heroin confiscated by law enforcement personnel. Seizures for cocaine totaled 16,431 kilograms for Texas while marijuana seizures totaled 607,995 kilograms for 2012. Totals for methamphetamine seizures in Texas were 577 kilograms and 281 kilograms for heroin reported U.S Customs and Border Protection in 2012.

## **8. Drug-Related Deaths in the Nation and Texas**

As the world's largest drug consumers Americans pay a heavy price in terms of drug-related deaths due to accidental and intentional overdose. Drug-related emergency room visits continue to increase yearly as evidenced in reports from 2009 to 2012 in which hospital admissions rose from 635,460 to 808,233 (DAWN 2010). Furthermore, the Office of

National Drug Control Policy (2013) in their *Drug Data Summary* has estimated that 50,000 drug-related deaths annually. In 2012 there were 538 drug-related deaths in Texas and approximately 3,588 phone calls were made that year to the Texas Poison Control Centers as reported by the Gulf Coast Addiction Technology and Treatment Center. Deaths from drug abuse are tabulated by the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN 2010) estimates data gathered from 43 metropolitan areas and this source found that Los Angeles had the most deaths due to overdoses at 1,192.

The federal government sponsors the collection of emergency room episodes due to drug use as well as medical examiner reports on all drug-related deaths under the auspices of DAWN (2010) which has identified the social characteristics of those who have died due to drug use. Men are three times as likely as women to die from drug-related causes while Whites (58%) comprise the majority of drug-related deaths. In such deaths, 1 in 8 were Hispanic and 1 in 5 were black. Most drug-related deaths (75%) were listed by DAWN (2010) to be due to multiple drug use with the most common combination being a mix of cocaine, heroin/morphine, narcotic analgesics, and alcohol. While DAWN gives us some idea as to the numbers of Americans seeking medical attention due to drug abuse and the drug-related deaths that result this source of government statistics fails to provide an accurate account of such statistics due to the limited number of cities they gather information from and other recording problems. Nevertheless, the statistics we do have are somber.

## **9. Drug Trafficking Generates Violence and More Crime**

The Bureau of Justice Statistics for 2012 highlights the fact that drug trafficking breeds violent crime due to the



competition over the drug market, disputes between dealers or between sellers and buyers as well as murders over the theft of drugs, drug scams, or punishment for the theft or shortchanging of money. The FBI reported that in 2012, 5% of all 14,827 homicides for the year were drug-related. These homicides occurred during drug transactions or the manufacturing of drugs. The peak year for drug-related homicides was 1989 when 7% of the 18,954 deaths were attributed to the crack epidemic as noted in the Uniform Crime Report for 2003.

Besides fueling homicides, drug trafficking accelerates criminal activity due to drug addiction. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012) has reported that 1 in 4 convicted property offenders had committed crimes to get money for drugs. Acquiring money for drugs was also the reason given by 19% of State prisoners and 16% of Federal prisoners for their offenses. Not only are these individuals committing crimes to acquire more drugs but over half were high while committing their offences (BJJS 2012). Whether drug addiction leads to crime or crime leads to drug addiction, the two are intertwined.

## **10. Drug Trafficking Arrests**

The country's drug laws are enforced by federal, state, and local criminal justice agencies. The Uniform Crime Reports produced by the FBI for 2012 estimated that 1,538,800 local and state arrests for drug abuse violations had occurred through the nation. While most arrests are for drug possession, one-fifth of such arrests are for drug trafficking and manufacturing. The area of the country with the highest percentage of arrests for the sale/manufacture of drugs according to the FBI (2012) is the Northeast (29%) while the Midwest accounts for 23% of such arrests, 17% of these arrests are made in the South, and 16% in the West

(totals add up to less than 100% due to rounding). From 1990 to 2012, drug offenders have swelled the growth of State prison populations by 30%. These drug offenders serve an average of 27 months as only 43% of such sentences are typically served in the State prisons. Drug traffickers, on the other hand, made up 99% of the drug offender population in Federal prisons in 2012 and serve a greater portion of their sentences than those in State prison (FBI 2012).

Last year there were 912 juveniles arrested for the sale of manufactured or illicit drugs in Texas and 13,413 adults were arrested on the same charges according to the Texas Department of Public Safety (2013). The Office of National Drug Control Policy (2013) in their *Drug Data Summary* has estimated that the overall cost to society due to drug abuse is well over \$160 billion in terms of money spent on buying illicit drugs, health care costs, productivity losses, housing drug offenders and drug traffickers in correctional facilities, among other expenses. These mind-numbing numbers do not become part of the lyrics of the narcocorridos, only the dead bodies do.

## **11. The Cultural Importance of Narcocorridos**

The music of the borderlands centers on the lives of the people which includes their joys, their hardships, their triumphs, and their tragedies. While the narcocorridos may embellish the truth a bit, one can argue that they serve as a cultural lesson for all people. The narcocorridos bring home the message that it is possible to rise above poverty, to achieve material success, to outwit the King and his men, to do some good deeds for your people, but if you are on the wrong side of the law it will only be a short matter of time before you become a legend. Containing part fiction and part truth, the narcocorridos impart valuable cultural impact as they are used as a form of daily entertainment that provides

an education about the harsh realities of the criminal lifestyle.

Folk ballads like other songs touch different chords within each listener. For some, narcocorridos are catchy songs that provide a good opportunity to dance or serve as a backdrop to play cards or just enjoy the company of family and friends along with good food and drink. For the families that commission a ballad about their loved one who was lost in the drug wars the narcocorrido is an expression of love and an opportunity to memorialize a relative or friend. Yet, for many of the young, the desperately poor, the ignorant, and the dreamers the narcocorridos spell out the formula to achieve success. There are many powerful cultural themes that run through these folk ballads. Overcoming the poor hand that life has dealt you is one of these strong themes as listeners get the unequivocal message that even the most common man can with courage, guns, and drugs transform his life. Anyone can grab with both hands all that his heart desires. Another strong cultural theme in narcocorridos is the Robin Hood angle as drug trafficking presents the opportunity not only to better your station in life but to reach out to help your family and friends and also lift them up from poverty. Like the fabled Robin Hood, the drug trafficker can share his ill-gotten gains and actually perform good deeds for his entire community. How enticing are those cultural themes? And, if things do not work out you still get to live large for a while and become immortalized in a narcocorrido.

The journalists Chris Summers and Dominic Bailey point out that despite the ban, the BBC has acknowledged that in the past 30 years the biggest growth in the Mexican musical world has been in the popularity of narcocorridos. Mexican government officials consider these folk ballads about drug traffickers to be dangerous as they glamorize the drug trade

contends Elijah Wald who has written several books on narcocorridos. Summers and Bailey have highlighted the fact that the U.S. market for narcocorridos is worth \$300 million a year and that Los Angeles is the distribution hub for this music in this country. Government officials on both sides of the border believe that narcocorridos seduce the young, the poor, and the powerless into a life of crime. Radio bans and parental advisory labels will not quell the desire of the people to hear these folk ballads. Some believe that these ballads can serve as a handy moral compass while still providing a momentary sharing of empowerment for listeners of narcocorridos. The ending for the Mexican Robin Hood or the Mexican-American Robin Hood is always the same as there are no fairy tale endings in these border ballads. Yet, musical censorship in all its forms will never stamp out the desire to dream and be immortal. Americo Paredes (1958) in his overview of Mexican history traced how folk ballads have long been a staple of the Mexican diet since the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) when peasants fought to overthrow their Spanish and French rulers to live free and to reap the rewards of what hard work and courage can achieve. Those desires remain strong as the poor today still fight and claw their way to a better life and no method of musical censorship nor the consequences of the war on drugs will end those strivings.

Despite the inspirational, entertainment, and cultural value of these musical expressions we must keep in mind the somber statistics of the harm caused by drug trafficking and drug use to people on both sides of the border and in particular the devastation caused the young. We must address reality. Folk ballads about drug traffickers do not awaken the desire to use drugs as that is an issue we must address head-on. What can we do to combat the desire to

consume drugs? That is a question that we must find new ways to address if we are to make headway. What can we do about the continued popularity of narcocorridos? Whether Mexican or American parents or government officials on both sides of the border like it or not, the drug trafficker will continue to live on in the musical ballads of the borderlands.

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