Reviews

Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas

By Elijah Wald, Harper Collins Rayo

Even longtime chart buffs were surprised when Jessie Morales, a virtually unknown 18–year–old from Los Angeles, debuted at No. 1 on *Billboard's* Top Latin Albums last June. But Morales's album was a tribute to singer/songwriter Chalino Sanchez, a legend of the California Mexican immigrant community who was murdered in 1992. Almost 10 years after Sanchez's death, his influence is far greater than he would have ever imagined, and his name still sparks fascination. Elijah Wald, author of the new book *Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*, calls Sanchez "the defining figure of the L.A. (corrido) scene." Wald said Morales's unexpected success epitomizes the disconnect between a new underground culture and American mainstream society. He believes that the dominant cultures need to understand subcultures to avoid racial strife. Corridos originated as a nineteenth–century Mexican folk ballad, accompanied mostly by an accordion and 12–string guitar (bajo sexto), that, like storysongs, described tales of Mexican revolutionary heroes. In recent decades, corridos focused on conflict between Mexican outlaws and U.S. authorities. However, the new breed of U.S.–based corrido acts led by Morales and Lupillo Rivera borrow from gangsta rap's appeal. "A lot of poor kids are seeing that the only people in their communities who have money, fancy cars and beautiful models hanging off their arms are the drug traffickers," he said. "And it makes it a very romantic thing."

On the other end of the spectrum are the genre's elder statesmen, Los Tigres del Norte. Though the band got its start in the early 1970s with seminal narcocorridos such as "Contrabando y Traicion" and "La Banda del Carro Rojo," the group has remained a chart force with its activist political songs. For example, "El Centroamericano" from the group's new CD *Uniendo Fronteras* deals with an undocumented Central American immigrant's attempt to pass for Mexican. "He pretends to be Mexican so he will only be deported as far as Mexico," Wald said. "Los Tigres are always coming up with new things. Meanwhile, all the other guys are still just singing about drugs and guns."

Though Texas's contributions to the corrido scene have been minor in recent decades, Wald visited key cities along the Texas–Mexican border. Texas of course, was the birthplace of the seminal "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez," a perfect example of the confrontation Wald describes. The song depicted an actual event that occurred on Cortez's ranch near Karnes City in 1901. His brother was killed by a sheriff while being questioned about a stolen horse. Cortez killed the sheriff and fled on horseback. He was eventually acquitted by a Corpus Christi jury, which found he had acted in self–defense. Over 50 versions of "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" had been recorded by 1958, when University of Texas professor Americo Paredes wrote a book about the episode and its historical context titled *With His Pistol In His Hand.* Wald hitchhiked around Mexico and South Texas, interviewing musicians and fans. What do we learn of import from his travels? That despite the corrido's humble origins, the modern narcocorrido is essentially a Mexican cousin to gangsta rap. And, like the mainstream music industry, sales are largely driven by controversy and celebrity. There is little historical context on U.S.–Mexico relations and the drug war in *Narcocorrido*. Wald's first–person account also wears after a while, and could have benefited from more judicious editing. Still, Wald's book fills a gap. Corridos provide a valuable insight into a large, but largely invisible, segment of the Mexican and American population. "The corrido is sort of a picture of how the world looks to people in the street," he said.

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Southern Exposure: The Story of Southern Music in Pictures

By Richard Carlin and Bob Carlin, Billboard Books. Foreword by John Hartford.

Southern Exposure presents a slice of photographic history of mostly Anglo, mostly male, mostly amateur music–makers of the South, their instruments, and various performance contexts. The aim of this book is to explore how pictures tell stories of the musical life of the southern states. The authors wanted to address the questions "What is southern music? And how is it popularly portrayed?" (p. 8). In an attempt to answer these rather large questions, they have compiled seventy–nine photographs dated from the 1880s to around 1950. The book is divided into eight sections with the following topical headings: Music Making at Home, Rural and Industrial Working Music, Folk Instruments and Their Players, Music as Part of Worship and Ceremony, Music for Dancing and Recreation, Street Musicians and Semiprofessionals, Ragtag Child Bands, and Small–Town and Big-City Performers. One of the book's strengths lies in its diverse collection of images exhibiting a variety of contexts for music making in the South.

Slightly less than half (thirty–three) of the photographs date from the 1930s. This emphasis is understandable considering that one of the authors' primary sources for these pictures was the Library of Congress's Farm Security Administration (FSA) archives. The FSA was one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's relief agencies enacted during the Depression era. The purpose of this program was both to document the vanishing life of the southern *Musical Traditions* (New York: Schirmer, 2002), published in collaboration with the Smithsonian Folkways Archive and edited by Jeff Todd Titon and Bob Carlin. In addition to Bob's co–editor role with the series, Richard Carlin's essay, "Irish Music from Cleveland," can be found in the third volume of this series, *British Isles Music.*

Besides North Carolina, other southern states pictorially referenced in *Southern Exposure* are Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, West Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, southern Ohio, Oklahoma, and Texas. Twenty–six photographs are included without any reference to a state.

The visual representations of music making in Texas are limited. There are two pictures in the section titled Rural and Industrial Working Music, one of a group of African–American prisoners "singing in time to the movement of their axes" at Darrington State Prison Farm, Sandy Point, Texas (p. 35), and another of an Anglo railroad work gang laying track in Lufkin, Texas (pp. 38-39). Besides a mention in one annotation that Bob Wills started out selling Light Crust Dough (p. 151), the only other Texas reference is found in a photograph of Otis and Eleanor Clements, who were members of Doc Schneider's Texas (p. 149).

The textual material of this collection includes a six–page introduction briefly addressing such topics as "Who Are These Folk?"; "The Myth of the South"; "Family Gatherings"; "The Camera's Eye"; and "The Urge to Collect." In addition to a brief introduction at the beginning of each section, the authors provide short annotations to the individual photographs, including bibliographic information where known, such as the picture's date, location, photographer, source, and the names of the subjects photographed. While the authors "tried to allow the images to speak for themselves," the annotations often include circumstances surrounding the creation of the image. Some of the pictures included in this collection are portraits. Others are less formal snapshots of southerners making music. Whether posed or spontaneous, the authors use each photograph as a springboard into a brief description of the historical context of music making. To cite one example, the annotation accompanying the mid–1930s photograph of Slim and Wilma Martin in the studio of WALB radio extends beyond description toward interpretation and history, when the authors write: "These kind of husband–and–wife, semiprofessional musicians would often have a fifteen–minute show on a local station (if they could find a sponsor). There usually wasn't any pay, but they could advertise other local appearances and also sell songbooks or records if they had any. Their repertoire would typically be a mix of favorite old ballads and songs, sentimental popular hits, and hymns" (p. 138).

The reader must take the authors at their word, since the information beyond the bibliographic specifics of the photograph itself is not documented. Indeed, a bibliography or suggestions for further reading would improve this collection.

One of *Southern Exposure*'s strengths lies in its diverse collection of photographs of southern music activity in a variety of contexts. Unfortunately, for the reader interested in Texas's role in the southern musical contributions to American music, there are comparatively few photographs of Texans. Nevertheless, this book should not be ignored by those interested in visual representations of music making in the south.

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The Journal of Texas Music History, and his article, "Defining Texas Music: Lota May Spell's Contributions," was published in the Spring 2000 issue of *The Bulletin of the Society for Amerian Music*. He has also contributed several articles to the forthcoming *Handbook of Texas Music*.

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