

SOCIETY

# Ballads For the Bad Guys

The Mexican craze for songs glorifying the violent lives (and deaths) of drug lords has crossed the border. Are *narcocorridos* the Latin gangsta rap?

BY TIM MCGIRK/LOS ANGELES

IN RIALTO, ON OLD ROUTE 66 JUST OUTSIDE Los Angeles, young Mexican Americans in sharp cars and glittery, cowboy-goth clothes are pouring into a hangar-size nightclub to hear El Komander sing. Brawny, buzz-cut and with a midnight pallor, El Komander looks as if a Mexican drug cartel might have sent him on a summer internship with the Russian mob. He's wearing a black satin cowboy outfit with flashes of silver lightning embroidered on its sleeves. His *narcocorridos*—narco ballads—are about the gunfights and beheadings going on south of the border: the word *asesino* (murderer) figures heavily in his lyrics. "Trashed with drugs," he croons in a deceptively sweet voice. "Blowing heads off those who cross us."

Driven by a tuba, an accordion, drums and a guitar, *narcocorridos* sound like polka pumped up on meth. By turns frenetic and mournful, the songs celebrate the violent lives—and grisly deaths—of Mexican drug lords. The genre's popularity has

#### WHAT IS IT?

#### **Narcocorrido**

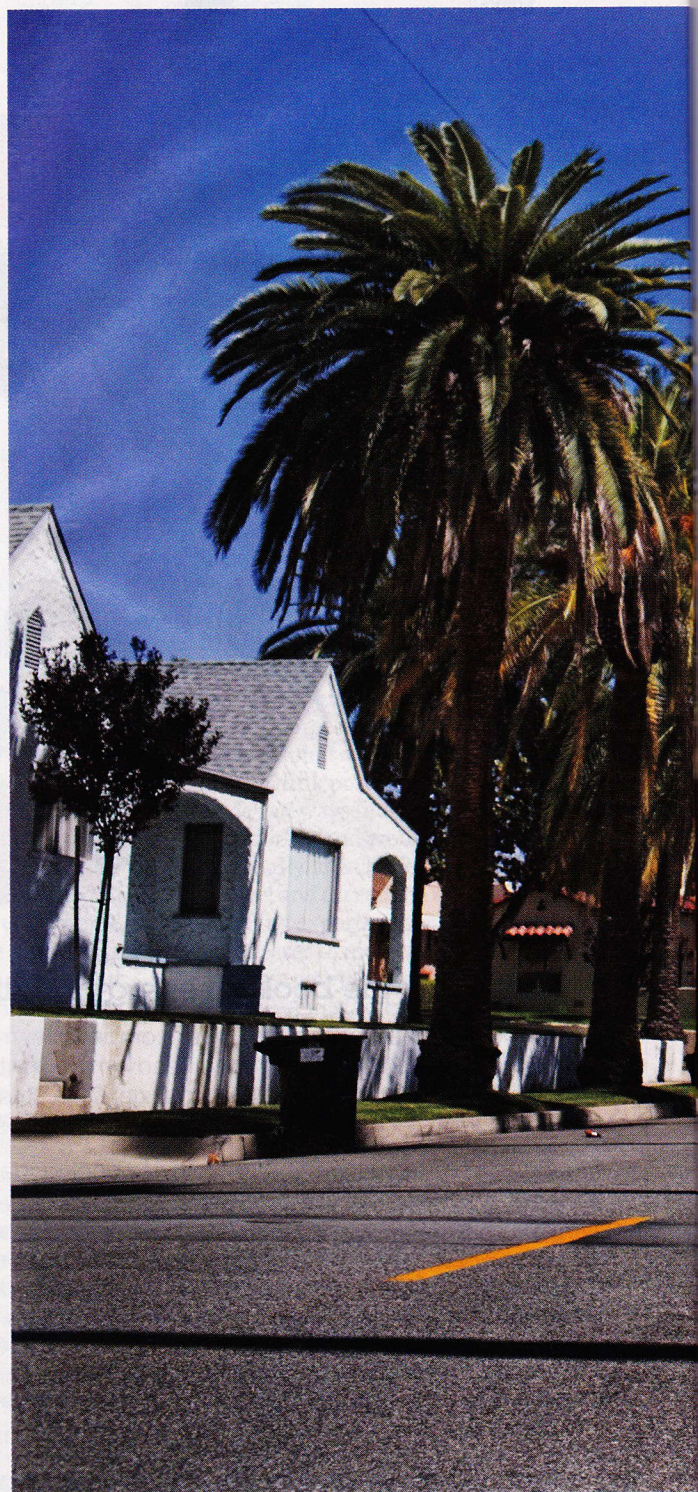
The classic Mexican *corrido*, or narrative ballad, has been updated to tell tall tales about drug kingpins. Most songs are set to an amped-up polka beat

#### FACTS

■ Twins Enterprises and the more than 20 acts it represents count more than 1.5 million fans on MySpace

■ Singers are often paid by cartel bosses to celebrate them in song

■ Twelve balladeers have been killed in Mexico's drug wars



Photographs by Shaul Schwarz for TIME



**Minstrel of mayhem** Narcocorrido star Alfredo Rios, a.k.a. El Komander, walks by his Burbank, Calif., studio. His revved-up ballads about drug kingpins get heavy play on radio stations across the U.S., and his videos have a massive following on the Internet



**Art imitates life** Actors in Tijuana prepare for a scene in the narco movie *Las Aguilas Andan Solas* (*Eagles Fly Alone*)

spread quickly from Mexico, and dozens of singers now routinely tour the U.S., finding huge audiences that are not limited to the nation's 47 million Hispanics. And El Komander—Alfredo Rios, a 24-year-old Mexican—is the genre's hottest new star. His top single, "El Katch," his producers say, is getting heavy radio play from San Diego to Chicago. "My fans think this music gives them an identity," he says.

### Latin Gangsta

THE MUSIC'S APPEAL IS TIED TO ITS ASSOCIATION with danger. In that sense, the *narcocorrido* has something in common with 1990s gangsta rap, complete with the fast and ferocious lifestyles of its performers. Many balladeers receive money from drug lords to write paeans about their exploits; some are paid to perform at gangs' private parties in secret hideouts. But being one gangster's favorite singer can make you a target for his rivals: nearly a dozen musicians have been killed since 2006. That only adds to the *narcocorrido's*

### Narcocorrido Lyrics

"Los Sanguinarios del M1" ("The Bloodthirsty M1"), by the BuKnas de Culiacán, is a tribute to Manuel Torres Felix, a leader of the notorious Sinaloa cartel

### SPANISH ENGLISH

**Con cuernos de chivo y basura en la nuca volando cabezas al que se atraviesa. Somos sanguinarios locos, bien ondeados. Nos gusta matar pa dar levantotes. Somos los mejores, siempre en caravana.**

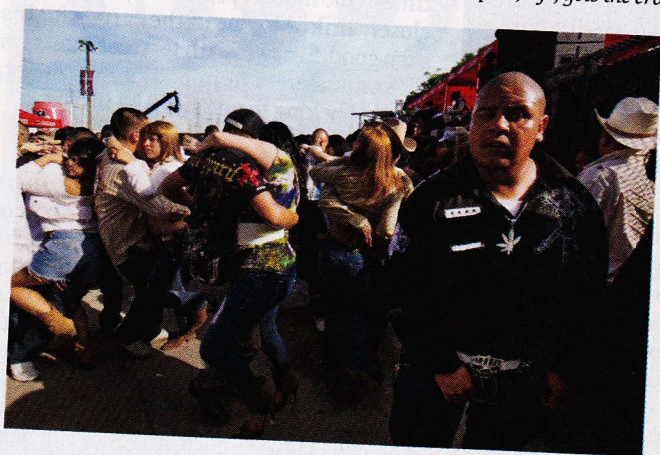
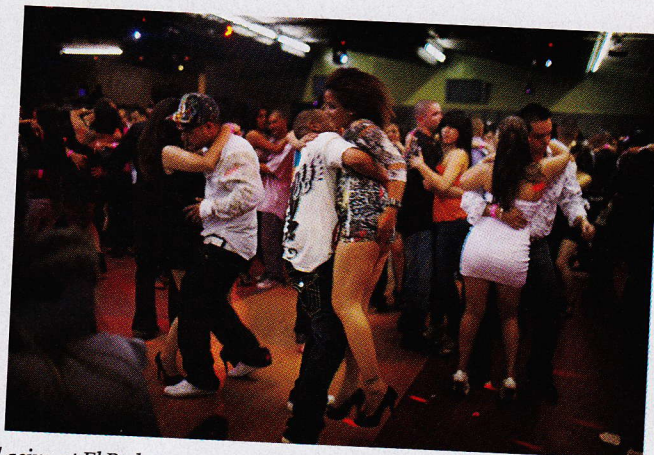
**With an AK-47, trashed with drugs, blowing heads off those who cross us. We are bloodthirsty crazies, very high. We like to kill, to kidnap. We are the best, always traveling by caravan.**

mystique among its fans. Says Luis Gomez, a computer-studies student at an underground *narcocorrido* event in a Gardena, Calif., garage: "Sure, it was violent. But it's about freedom, seizing what you want—the babes, the cars, the money."

The ballads have deep roots; Mexicans have been singing about drug runners since the 1930s. But the new wave of *narcocorrido* is more gruesome than ever, and it portrays the drug lord as a hard-partying, daredevil Robin Hood fighting a corrupt system. That attitude, says Los Angeles promoter Joel Vázquez, appeals equally to Mexicans and young second- and third-generation Hispanic Americans who feel the "hopelessness" of making a living in the U.S. during these grim economic times—much the same way that gangster tales were popular during the Great Depression. The *narcocorrido* has given some young Mexican Americans a new, if violent, sense of identity within the American cauldron of ethnicities. "Even though I was born in L.A.," says Chuy Lopez, a



**Not your father's polka** Andrés "El Macizo" Márquez, left, gets the crowd going at El Rodeo



**The beat and the bling** Fans get into the rhythm at an outdoor concert in Los Angeles; right, the characteristically flashy narco look



young fan at the Mi Hacienda nightclub in Pico Rivera, Calif., "I feel like I'm from down there, Mexico, and I'm proud of it."

The *corrido's* migration from rural Mexico to urban Hispanic-American audiences began in the 1970s with stars like Los Tigres del Norte, who wear oversized sombreros and appeal to an older generation. In the early 1990s, a rough-hewn rebel, Chalino Sánchez, appeared on the Hispanic nightclub scene around L.A. Sánchez's most memorable performance came in 1992 at a club in Southern California when a man jumped onstage and shot him. Sánchez was wounded but pulled out his own revolver and fired back. Elijah Wald, a songwriter and expert on the *narcocorrido*, recounts, "That was the moment when L.A. kids woke up and realized, 'Hey, this isn't our mom and dad's music. It's as tough as gangsta rap, and it's Mexican. It's who we are.'" (A few months after the California incident, Sánchez was executed during a tour of Mexico.)

### The Impresarios

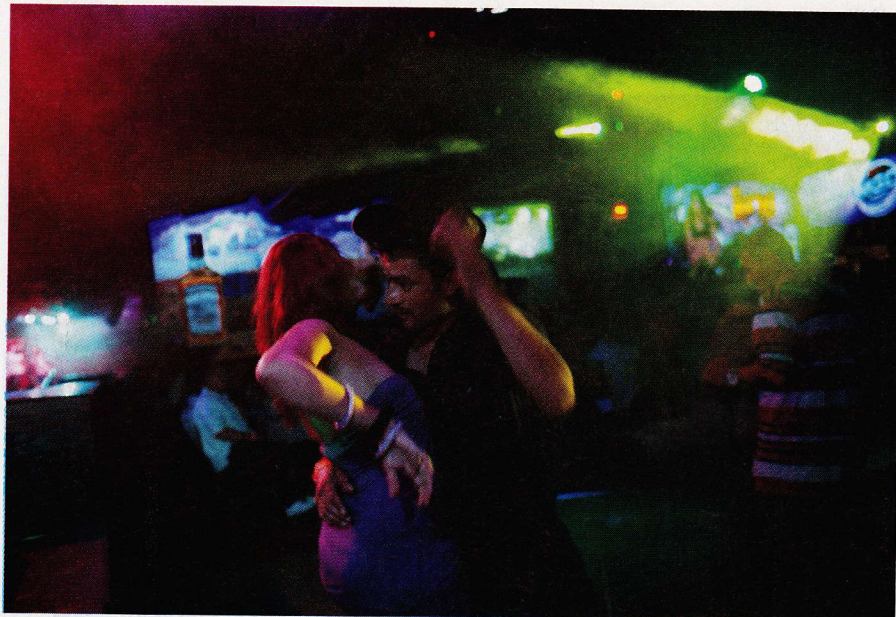
BY THE LATE 1990S, THE GENRE WAS RIPE for commercial exploitation. Enter Omar and Adolfo Valenzuela. Their clarinetist father in the Mexican state of Sinaloa didn't want them to earn their living performing, as he had done, at the clandestine fiestas of the drug lords, so he took his twin sons north. But on the Internet, the brothers began to notice the vibrant subculture of *narcocorridos* that was taking off in the Mexican barrios across America. In 2000, they formed Twiins Enterprises, opened a recording studio in Burbank, Calif., and began experimenting with musical twists on the traditional *corrido*, revving up the beat to Bonneville Salt Flats speeds. They also updated the lyrics to keep up with the barbarism of the cartel killers. Beheadings were passé; killers were chopping their rivals into pieces and dumping them into vats of lye so the bodies could never be identified.

The twins now have more than 20 bands and singers in their stable, and

their songs regularly rack up half a million plays on YouTube. Their musicians play nightclub gigs all over Mexico and the U.S.—which, more than record sales in this age of free musical downloads and streams, is how the bands and the twins earn their money. One measure of the phenomenon: the twins say they have more than 1.5 million MySpace friends.

Like gangsta rap, the *narcocorrido* has spawned its own fashion sense. At El Komander's concert in Rialto, most of the men in the audience were dressed like wannabe drug traffickers, sporting Ed Hardy cowboy shirts or T-shirts emblazoned with golden eagles and AK-47s. Many wore heavy gold chains, usually with an amulet of doleful Jesús Malverde, a popular bandit from the 1900s turned patron saint of drug dealers. "It's become more than the music," says Adolfo Valenzuela. "It's a lifestyle."

Inevitably, the *narcocorrido* craze has caught the eye of advertisers seeking a way to appeal to Hispanic youth. Ford



**They shoot drug lords, don't they?** Narcocorridos are in demand at Los Angeles nightclubs like *El Rodeo*, where fans can indulge gangster fantasies

Motor Co. and the sandwich chain Subway are sponsors of a reality show about the Valenzuela brothers. *Los Twins* runs on the Hispanic TV channel Mun2, a division of NBC Universal. Sony signed *narcocorrido* band Cartel de Santa and has released five of its albums, which graft an urban edge onto the beat. The music has also given rise to a film genre. According to Baja Films Internacional director and producer Oscar Lopez, every month big-box stores sell tens of thousands of DVDs of gory Tijuana-made direct-to-video movies whose scripts are based on the latest *narcocorrido* hits. "Our audience is the illegal immigrant, the second-generation Mexican American who wants to rediscover his roots," says Lopez. "This is real for them in a way that *Batman* isn't."

It's not just Mexican Americans who provide a market. In the nightclubs, a few non-Hispanic faces are starting to appear, bobbing up and down to the careening narco beat. Promoter Vázquez believes that the *narcocorrido*, despite the violence it depicts, will find its way into the American mainstream. "Hip-hop was very controversial," he says, "and now you've got 50 Cent—a guy who's been shot at I don't know how many times—pitching for Vitamin Water, which is supposed to be healthy for you."

### Music and Murder

NOBODY SO FAR HAS BEEN DAFT ENOUGH to ask the drug lords publicly what they make of the growing popularity of *narcocorridos* in the U.S. But they probably love it. Howard Campbell, an anthropology

professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, says the cartels regard the ballads as useful propaganda. "The cartels are interested in two things, power and intimidation, and they're trying to influence public opinion to their side," he says. The songs can also serve as martial music: when the Sinaloa cartel tried to muscle into Mexico's Nuevo León state in 2006, gang members jammed police radio scanners to play odes to their boss "El Chapo" Guzmán. The effect was like ominous music welling up in a TV western at the approaching shadow of a gunslinger.

No wonder cartel bosses want balladeers of their own. Few minstrels will admit it publicly, but it is common for a drug lord to hire a musician to compose a song praising his bravery and cunning. As one popular singer confided to *TIME*, "I can make about \$20,000 a song, and if they like it, they'll also tip me with a pickup truck or something like that." Says another young *corrido* singer, Erik Estrada, from the Sinaloan capital of Culiacán: "I've been asked to write songs about these things, and I can't say no. I'm a singer, and that's what I do." He adds, "And besides, I have family down there. I have to be careful."

Nor is it a good idea to refuse a com-



### Drug Troubadours

To see a documentary about the dangerous lives of *narcocorridos*, go to [time.com/narco](http://time.com/narco)

mand performance at a narco fiesta in Mexico. Often, musicians are summoned to appear at an airport and are flown in a small aircraft to a rough landing strip in the Sierras. One musician opened his laptop and showed *TIME* a video shot at a drug trafficker's birthday party "somewhere in the hills of Sinaloa." The singer performed with a brand-new M-16 semi-automatic rifle slung across his shoulder. "That's what the head boss got for his birthday, and he had me perform with it on," he recounted.

For all his swagger onstage, El Komander is fearful of the men he praises in song. He is still shaken up over the murder of a fellow musician, Sergio "El Shaka" Vega, whose car was forced to a halt along a highway in Sinaloa last June; Vega was shot 16 times. One industry source says he was too closely linked to one of the cartels for his own good. "Vega's death terrifies me," says El Komander. "I'm nobody's messenger, nor do I belong to one side," he insists.

### It's About Speed

DESPITE THE RISKS, THESE ARE HIGH TIMES for narco balladeers. There's no dearth of material: between the Mexican government's four-year war against the drug lords and the many intercartel battles, it's easy to find a bloody tale to set to music. But competition is fierce; songs have to get out as quickly as a tabloid headline. On July 29, Edgar Quintero, the Los Angeles-born singer of the band Los BuKnas de Culiacán, was only half listening to a Tijuana radio station when he heard a live broadcast from a wealthy suburb in Guadalajara where more than 100 troops had cornered a fearsome drug lord of the Sinaloa cartel, Ignacio "The King of Crystal" Coronel. Famed for his jewel-encrusted pistols, Coronel died gangster-style, firing from both barrels. "I poured myself a few tequila shots," says Quintero, "and I started on the lyrics."

Quintero sang his lyrics over the telephone to *TIME*. The song described Coronel as "a humble man from the Sierras who was ratted out by an informer," glossing over the inconvenient truth that according to Mexican and U.S. drug agents, the King of Crystal had been exporting several tons of methamphetamines and cocaine into the U.S. over the past 10 years. That, in all probability, wouldn't have any impact on whether Quintero was going to have a hit on his hands. But he did have one hoop to jump through that most other musicians can safely ignore: clearing the lyrics with the surviving bosses of the Sinaloa cartel. Those critics carry machine guns. —WITH REPORTING BY SHAUL SCHWARZ/LOS ANGELES