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Carlos Navarro

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Musicians Hold Concert to Promote Caballeros Templarios Cartel in Michoacán State

by Carlos Navarro  
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In 2007 and 2008, more than a dozen musicians were murdered, allegedly at the hands of drug capos. A common denominator for most of the musicians was that they performed a style of music known as narcocorridos, which glorified the exploits of drug cartels (SourceMex, Jan. 9, 2008). The motives for killing the musicians differed. Perhaps they were targeted by the rivals of cartels that they glorified. Alternatively, they might have been killed for unpaid debts.

Seven years later, the narcocorridos are as popular as ever, although musicians are no longer targeted by organized crime. Some criminal organizations such as the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) in Michoacán state have come to view the musicians as an asset in their campaign to soften their image before the Mexican public.

Concert held in state-owned venue

On Feb. 2, the music-promotion company Andaluz Music organized a megaconcert featuring popular performers of narcocorridos, including the groups Los de la A and Calibre 50. The show, which lasted about 10 hours, was held at the Pabellón Don Vasco in Morelia, a venue owned by the state of Michoacán. Given the controversial nature of the concert, it was remarkable that authorities gave their approval so easily, even using state police officers to provide security.

The narcocorridos are part of the música alterada movement, which uses a narrative format to highlight the lifestyle and violent actions of organized crime, including acts of revenge and retaliation against rivals. In Michoacán, the narcocorridos have evolved into the corridos enfermos. "[These songs] openly boast of decapitations, kidnappings, and the complicity between the drug traffickers and the police," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

Furthermore, the message of support for the drug traffickers is frequently heard beyond the live concerts. "It is a well-organized industry which makes millions of dollars annually," said brownplanet.com. "Their albums are available via the internet or in the same places where artists are giving concerts."

Los de la A lead singer Alfredo Ríos, also known as El Komander, has composed songs for the son and daughter of Enrique Plancarte, one of the leaders of the Caballeros Templarios.

During the Feb. 2 performance in Morelia, Ríos and Los de A made no secret of their loyalty to the drug cartel, whose stronghold is their home city of Apatzingán. The group—which came on stage wearing camouflage military fatigues, bulletproof vests, and helmets—started the concert by yelling out to the audience their support for the Caballeros Templarios. "If they chop off my head, I won't care. Caballeros Templarios all the way!" said Ríos.

After a couple of songs, Ríos addressed the crowd, encouraging them to support the Caballeros Templarios in reclaiming control of his home town, which is now occupied by the federal military
"We’re recruiting people to go to Apatzingán and kick some a** over there!" Ríos said to the crowd of about 6,000.

Envelopes filled with cocaine were circulating through the crowd by the middle of the show. Furthermore, the audience was not reluctant to use the drug in front of the police, who opted not to take any action. In the midst of the drug-consumption frenzy, Ríos prompted the crowd to continue snorting cocaine. "Bring out all the drugs! Let’s all get crazy tonight!" said El Komander.

The concert occurred just days after troops and federal police detained Caballeros Templarios leader Dionicio Loya Plancarte, also known as El Tito. Authorities had offered a large reward for information leading to Loya Plancarte’s arrest, but it is not certain whether this financial incentive played any role in his detention. Loya Plancarte is the uncle of Enrique Plancarte, who is still at large.

**President Peña Nieto offers Michoacán plan**

Shortly after Loya Plancarte’s arrest, the government announced an agreement with self-defense groups in Michoacán, which had formed to push back against the cartels, primarily the Caballeros Templarios. The agreement allows the groups to register their weapons and form a temporary rural-police brigade.

The accord with the self-defense groups, which have endured oppression from the cartels (SourceMex, May 29, 2013), is only a part of the federal government’s strategy to go after the Caballeros Templarios. Two days after the infamous concert in Morelia, President Enrique Peña Nieto arrived in the capital city of Michoacán to announce his administration’s strategy, known as Por Michoacán, to deal with the violence in the state. The president, who was visiting Michoacán for the first time since taking office on Dec. 1, 2012, pledged to spend about 45.5 billion pesos (US$3.4 billion) on "at least 250 actions" to help economic development, education, infrastructure, health, housing and other areas that will support the various communities throughout the state. "Together, we will achieve [peace]," said the president, who promised to visit the state at least 12 times this year.

The president also used the speech to justify the presence of thousands of soldiers and federal police in the state. "The use of force is necessary but insufficient," said the president.

Critics countered, however, that the plan is very similar to ex-President Felipe Calderón’s failed campaign in 2010, in which billions of pesos were spent with no results. Critics said the brevity of the president’s visit to Michoacán was a sign that he did not fully understand the situation, including the emotional toll that the ongoing conflict has inflicted on the local population.

"Peña Nieto spent only a few hours in Morelia, and once he had delivered his message, he returned home to the presidential palace to attend to other matters," columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "Perhaps no one told him that, during a popular concert just a few days before, thousands of people acclaimed the songs intended to enhance the reputation of the Caballeros Templarios, which are now part of the culture and the modern history of Michoacán."

Gil Olmos said Peña Nieto’s lack of connection with the people of Michoacán could ultimately hamper his efforts in the state. "He did not speak of the victims of violence, of the thousands who have been killed, have disappeared, or have been displaced," said the Proceso columnist. "He did
not mention the corrupt officials who have not been held accountable, the police officers who have colluded with criminals, or the criminals themselves who remain at large."

"Most of all, he did not offer a hint of how the state was going to recover the social fabric that has been damaged by decades of state governments that have corrupted and been corrupted," added Gil Olmos. "This situation is not fixed with money, but with justice."

**Comparisons to gangsta rap**

Some studies that have documented the impact of the narcocorridos on society have likened the style of music to similar modes popular in the US, including gangsta rap, which came on the scene in the US in the 1990s. "The culture that has evolved around the drug-trafficking gangs is similar to the wider gangster culture that has attracted US and European audiences for generations," Guillermo Jimenez wrote in the online news site Pan Am Post.

Jimenez pointed to numerous similarities between narcocorridos and gangsta rap, including the glorification of violence and retaliation, which in the US might have contributed to the assassination of rap artists like Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. in the 1990s. "In the same manner, Mexico experienced the murders of performers of narcocorridos, including Valentín Elizalde, and Sergio Gómez of K-Paz de la Sierra [between 2006 and 2008]," noted Jimenez.

The sense of unease that developed during ex-President Calderón’s campaign against drug traffickers was also reflected in the narcocorridos, said Jimenez. Photojournalist and filmmaker Shaul Schwarz captured this tension in a documentary entitled Narco Cultura, which follows the Los Angeles based narcocorrido group Buknas de Culiacán. "The documentary, two years in the making, delves into the drug war in a way that no previous filmmaker has been able to," said The Huffington Post. "It depicts the narcocorridos in relation to the real violence that has terrorized Ciudad Juárez for years."

Schwarz—who has worked in conflict zones such as Haiti and the Gaza Strip—uses the documentary, released in 2013, to tell the stories of two individuals. One is Richi Soto, a crime-scene investigator in Ciudad Juárez, who has to deal with the terror, corruption, and intimidation carried out by the cartels. The other is Edgar Quintero, songwriter and singer for the Buknas de Culiacán, who has acquired a growing legion of fans for his songs celebrating the violent lifestyle of the cartels.

While Schwarz's documentary takes a serious look at narcocorridos and the glorification of drug cartels, critics say other media in the US and Mexico use works of fiction to depict the criminal organizations and drug-trafficking activities. These include programs like Breaking Bad, a show that depicts the life of a high school chemistry teacher who turns to production and sales of methamphetamines. "The success of Breaking Bad in the US and Europe is a reflection of the new wave of programs appearing on cable television, which depict the ‘anti-heroes’ of drug trafficking," columnist Jenaro Villamil wrote in Proceso.

Villamil said the same type of characters are appearing on Latin American television. "We are no longer talking about glorifying the criminal figures of the 1930s or the Godfather, in the style of Al Capone or The Sopranos, but the capos of the Latin American drug trade," said the Proceso columnist.
Villamil says television operations in Latin America and Spanish-speaking US networks air several successful television dramas and soap operas (telenovelas) that feature drug-trafficking operations, including El Patrón del Mal, El Cártel de los Sapos, and El Señor de los Cielos. US networks will debut two new narcotelenovelas in 2014, Camelia la Texana on Telemundo and El Varón de la Droga on Unimas (an affiliate of Univisión).

Furthermore, said Villamil, Unimas acquired the rights in January to air a special on the life and career of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, who made Forbes magazine’s list of billionaires in 2009 (SourceMex, March 18, 2009).

Villamil said Guzmán Loera has become far more prominent among US audiences than Mexican drug traffickers Rafael Caro Quintero, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, and the Arellano Félix brothers, and Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar Gaviria. In 2013, the city of Chicago declared El Chapo Public Enemy Number 1 because a large share of the drugs sold on that city’s streets are thought to come from the Sinaloa cartel (SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2013).

"El Chapo became famous at the time he managed his arranged escape from the Puente Grande federal prison in Jalisco in 2001 (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001), but he gained status as a mythical figure because his power grew during the six-year period [of ex-President Calderón] when war was declared against the drug capos," said Villamil. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb. 12, 2014, reported at 13.35 pesos per US$1.00.]

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