The Myth of the Outlaw in Mexican and North American Border Music

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Many songs embody myths that create social and cultural identity. One example is the Myth of the Outlaw, which was instrumental in the construction of American society in frontier days; its misappropriation and misuse, however, threaten to deconstruct and divide that society in our time. A current issue in political discourse is the question of immigration and identity, and the Myth of the Outlaw is at the heart of it. This chapter will show how this myth is used in folk and popular music, and how this music is used in turn for political propaganda.

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Introduction

In the age of World Music, you can turn on the radio or television anywhere and hear music of many styles, including Latin-American.[1] Commercial stations play music that has been carefully crafted, promoted, and selected for its market appeal. The global popularity of Latin American and Latin-American influenced music is a reliable indicator of current taste in popular music.[2] Another persuasive indicator of its popularity is the influence it has had on other genres of North American music in both musical styles and themes.

Latin American music, once a niche on the American music scene, is now part of the mainstream, as Pollyanna Schroeder (1978, 124) and Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. observe (2002, 113), and its influence can be heard in many genres such as country, pop, rock, and jazz. Chris Kjorness points out in "Latin Music Is American Music" (2013) that "for more than a century, immigrants—particularly those from Latin America—have helped forge the cultural identity of the United States. And nowhere is this more apparent than in popular music, where from ragtime to hip-hop, artists have frequently looked beyond the North American continent to find American music." Similarly, Martin Gannon and Rajnandini Pillai point out how music expresses national culture: "musical genres (samba and tango) have achieved international prominence and recognition, in large part because of the manner in which they express the cultural values of Brazil and Argentina" (2013, 17). Daniel Chamberlain explains how music both represents and constructs Mexican identity (2003, 80). When such musical styles become popular, not only the tastes, but also the world view, of the audience are transformed.

Easy accessibility to internet streaming services has made it easy for listeners to discover new music from all around the world, but ironically, this resulted in a backlash by the music industry, which has focused on marketing music stars, streamlining radio playlists, and ignoring new music and musicians in favour of established names.[3]

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[1] As on the BBC World Service's broadcast of *The Impact of Latin American Music* (Hogan, Long-Middleton and Llewellyn 2013).

[2] Mervi Vuorela notes that "In 2022, Latin music record sales topped $1 billion for the first time in the US, accounting for around 8% of music streaming" (2024).

[3] The success of this tactic can be seen when comparing ticket prices for concerts featuring established stars to those featuring local musicians.

In addition to questions of economic motives and cultural identity, much of the controversy around, and opposition to, culturally significant music and musicians has been based on mythology and symbolism. Ethnomusicology has historically been seen and practiced as the study of "world music[s]" other than Western European and North American popular and classical music (Rice 2014), and current theories of ethnomusicology help in understanding the appeal of different forms of music to a wider audience, and how the interplay between themes and styles in music has affected and influenced cultural, social, and political life in North and Central America and throughout the world.

Music as a Means to Intercultural Understanding

Music is used as a means of both communication and persuasion; Crooke et al. (2023) explain how this can result in both cohesion and separation of different cultural groups: "Highlighting the role of empathy, Clarke et al. (2015) report that listening to music from another culture can increase positive attitudes to people of that culture, but only fractionally and only for people with already-established high levels of trait empathy" (2015, 28). While music is built upon universal structures of melody, harmony, and rhythm, different styles and themes reflect and embody different cultural norms, so that while listeners can recognize, understand, and enjoy music from another culture, this can lead to both unification and division: "Applying Berry's conceptual model to music, we can begin by considering the structural universalities of music, such as rhythm, pitch, and dynamics. These universalities, in turn, have different expressions as determined by varying contexts, leading to musical diversity" (2015, 30). In addition to these musical universalities, there are commonalities in song lyrics: "certain functions of music may be universal, such as the communication of emotion, storytelling, and an accompaniment to community and/or cultural events. Although such functions may be universal, the sociocultural expression of such functions may be unrecognizable to other groups" (30). Thus, while sharing music from other cultures can promote understanding, Clarke et al. emphasize that "music also demonstrates and embodies our cultural differences" (30). Rolf Lidskog argues that not only does music function to express and maintain pre-existing identities, but it also provides resources for contesting and negotiating identities and constructing new ones (2016, 25). One way that it does so is by means of what he calls "hybridizations" (2016, 25) when songwriters and musicians combine themes and styles, as in the music of diasporas, which are often communities that have come from other countries to new ones, such as the United

States. Thus, collective memories are formed, preserved, and defended through music (2016, 32). In this way, music can serve a political purpose; it can be part of discrimination against and stigmatisation of an ethnic group, as well as facilitating mobilisation and empowerment of a group and raising issues of social injustice and inequality (2016, 33).

Music as a Vehicle for Mythmaking

Music and songs from all eras and cultures share in the creation, propagation, dissemination, preservation, and modification of myths. In *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), Richard Slotkin outlines the mechanism of mythmaking: "A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors" (1973, 6). Slotkin focuses on the creation and propagation of The Myth of the American Frontier in books, magazines, and comic books, drawing from historical accounts and literary adaptations. One distinction he makes is the difference between myths in preliterate cultures, which he calls "artless," and the relationship between myth and literature in our modern world: "American myths—tales of heroes in particular—frequently turn out to be the works of literary hacks or of promoters seeking to sell American real estate by mythologizing the landscape" (1973, 6).[4] The myth Slotkin focuses on, "The Myth of the Frontier," is "the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (1973, 5). Since white European settlers found the American "wilderness" already inhabited by Native Americans and Mexicans, part of that "unlimited opportunity" consisted of subjugating or eliminating the existing occupants. The earliest component of the myth, therefore, or in Lakoffian terms, the "root" myth, is as follows:

1. The Myth of Good vs. Evil. Characters like Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill Cody, Kit Carson, and others epitomized the brave settlers (wearing the white hats in old movies), combating evil "Indians," Mexicans, and bandits (in black hats).

[4] An excellent example can be seen in Mullin and Welch's "Billy the Kid: The Making of a Hero" (1973), where the mythical character of stories in magazines and films bears scant resemblance to the real-life model.

This basic myth is the foundation of several related myths:

2. The Myth of Racial Superiority. In American (U.S.) popular literature and song, the white cowboy, farmer, or law officer is the good guy, while the "Indian" or Mexican is the baddie; in Mexican and Native American equivalents, the roles are reversed;
3. Soon after the initial westward expansion, as sheriffs, marshals, courts and judges, representing the rule of law, followed, the next stage of myth developed; The Myth of The Righteous Outlaw, wronged by corrupt authorities, seeking to protect himself, loved ones, and way of life. This led to the next development;
4. The Myth of The Divided Society: this trope is based in historical fact; Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech of June 16, 1858, defined the difference between the North, based on free labour, and the South, based on slave labour. The importance of the concept was emphasized by Lincoln's words, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," but that statement has become a catchphrase used to mean diverse things.
5. More recent (early to mid-20th century) developments in the Myth of the Frontier saw the expansion of The Wild West Myth to Mexico as an analogue to the American Wild West, and opposing but related myths of Mexico as a Land of Lawlessness and;
6. Mexico as a Land of Freedom.
7. The 21st century has seen a new variant of The Cowboy Myth: The Myth of The Politician Cowboy: in this inversion of myth 3, the corrupt official whom the old mythical cowboy hero opposed has appropriated the icons and symbols (formerly six-shooters, now assault rifles) of the outlaw to claim the status of Hero of the People.
8. Finally, The Myth of the Sellout. This is a meta-myth, an example of when the organic becomes the superorganic. The rebels rebel, and the audience reacts negatively when their previous heroes, who stood up for the marginalized minority, are perceived to have gone commercial, thus betraying their roots.

The Myth of The Righteous Outlaw and its derivatives depends on a fundamental shift in perspective; in order to be able to see a criminal as a hero, one must be able to sympathise with lawbreaking, share in the lawbreaker's grievances, and isolate oneself from the suffering of his (rarely her) victims. Marc Sageman describes the

psychological factors involved in *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism* (2017): "all attempts to understand the social world start with an automatic and natural cognitive process of self-categorization" (2017, 4); "Self-categorization is the core concept of a social science project analysing the behaviour of groups, known as the social identity perspective (SIP)" (2017, 4). Sageman's analysis focuses on terrorists who resort to political violence, but I would argue that the same factors apply to outlaws. The terrorists whose accounts form the basis of his analysis justified their actions on the basis of grievances (2017, 5), similar to the justifications that outlaw songs describe as the motivation for their protagonists' actions. Sageman distinguishes between "political violence" which is performed on behalf of a group and the actions of lone assassins whose violence is a result of mental disorders (2017, 15). Sageman lists activities that promote adhesion to the group, including meetings and newsletters (2017, 19); I would add songs and the social occasions where they are performed. The mechanism behind such shifts in worldview are based on a common sharing of grievances: "Often such communities evolve into a rejection of mainstream culture and norms, which members view as hypocritical and decadent" (2017, 19). Such groups require a leader/role model, someone whom the group can admire and emulate: "To understand the meaning and norms of their group, people turn to its most representative members, who serve as models for them to emulate and thereby exert a strong social influence on the rest of the group" (2017, 20). Thus, the mythologizing of martyrs, such as suicide bombers, and the outlaw hero, who is often caught and punished to the full extent of the law.

Latin American Identity in Popular Music

Norteña is a genre of music written and performed on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Its distinguishing sonic feature is that it is performed in ensembles featuring the accordion and the bajo sexto, a 12-stringed acoustic guitar. Its classic form is the corrida, a ballad that often tells either a love story or the story of a wronged man and his reaction to injustice. Daniel Chamberlain notes that corridos are a traditional form, brought from Spain in the 16th century (2003, 77). These songs are the Mexican equivalent of American western ballads, and they create a mirror image of the mythological cowboy. Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. notes the similarities between Tejano corridos and North American country music:

> Corridos, for instance, played a key role in expressing and reflecting the historical conflict between Anglos and Mexican in South Texas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries… They emerged and developed during a time of profound and violent change along the Rio Grande and in South Texas that embraced the years from 1836 to the 1930s. In many ways corridos were the product of a subordinate society whose only means of fighting the dominant Anglo powers was symbolic. Representative of this type of corrido and its hero was 'The Corrido of Grigorio Cortez,' an individual who single-handedly fought the Anglo law and won. (2002, 7)[5]

Timothy Rice notes that "The ethnomusicological literature is filled with arguments that echo the ancient Greeks about whether music helps to construct behavioural, cultural, and psychological patterns or whether preexisting social structures and cultural systems are determinants of musical style and practice" (2014, 11–12). Similarly, Thomas Turino claims that "Music and dance are key to identity formation because they are often public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group unique" (2008, 2). Like American cowboy ballads such as "I'm a Lonesome Fugitive," "El Paso," rock and roll equivalents like "I Fought the Law (and the Law Won)," and reggae songs like "I Shot the Sheriff," many corridos tell stories of individuals wronged by corrupt officials who fight injustice by taking the law into their own hands; in Mexican corridos, the antagonist is often not the Sheriff but the Texas Rangers, perpetuating the Myth of the Righteous Outlaw in various cultural milieus.

Corridos about outlaws and narcocorridos present one facet of Mexican and Latino resistance to political, cultural, and economic marginalization and racism. Carlos Veléz-Ibáñez argues that "Many Mexicans, however, did not and do not accept the 'border syndrome' or their expulsion. Resistance, rebellion, mobilization, creation, and invention continue to be the cultural responses of much of the population" (1996, 268–9).

Adrian Peel's *Tequila, Señoritas and Teardrops: Musicians Discuss the Influence of Mexico on Country Music* (2015) is a series of interviews with musicians. One of these, Ray Wylie Hubbard, describes the similarity between American outlaw music and Mexican narcocorridos:

[5] Texan Bobby Fuller had a hit in 1964 with "I Fought the Law (and the Law Won)," written by fellow Texan Sonny Curtis, a member of The Crickets.

> Why does Mexico still hold such fascination for country singers? 'It's romantic and adventurous,' Hubbard enthuses. 'I love the mythology of Mexican folk songs about outlaws. I read a book about the *narcocorridos* [Mexican folk songs glamorizing the illegal narcotics trade that have led to some well-known Mexican singers being killed—*corridos* deal with Mexican life in general]. They show that music is still very powerful, that people can be murdered just because of a song…. I love the whole myth of the American outlaw. They were probably horrible people, but I love the mythology. (2015, 35)

Hubbard's statement is an excellent example of Sageman's theory of how otherwise law-abiding people come to accept, and sometimes embrace, the outlaw/terrorist mentality; his conclusion, that "The outlaw here in the States has gone by the wayside, but it still seems to exist in Mexico" (2015, 35) may be a misconception, as many country singers, as well as rap singers, still lionize outlaws.[6]

It has often been said that Mexican music reflects the divided nature of the nation and its culture, perpetuating The Myth of The Divided Society. Mexico is a "torn national culture" that has "experienced dramatic changes in values at one or a few periods in history" (Gannon and Pillai 2013, 16). Mark Edberg notes from a social anthropology perspective that narcocorridos are a response to social stratification in which the exploited class attempts to assert its value with "'mythic texts' and 'grand stories' that affect how individuals feel about who they are in the world" (2004, 22):

> early corridos developed as the obverse of an emerging, and racist, body of Texas folklore portraying Mexicans as cruel, thieving, cowardly, 'racially degenerate' half-breeds with Indian blood, and generally no match for the superior Texan, as exemplified by the Texas Ranger archetype…. These corridos told of exploits against the '*rinches'* (Rangers), mocked them, and generally treated them as an Anglo stereotype exemplifying the general nature of the cultural and political opposition. (2004, 31)

This genre of storytelling thus perpetuates The Myth of Racial Superiority, from both sides.

[6] Jason Aldean's "Try That in a Small Town" (2023), for example, encourages listeners to take the law into their own hands. The song is an example of The Divided Society Myth that had often been used to describe Mexican Americans; ironically, Aldean uses it to threaten American city dwellers (it is implied that they are Black) to stay away from small towns or risk the vigilante justice of the small town "good ol' boys" with their guns. Another example is Clifton Hicks's "The Ballad of Kyle Rittenhouse" (2021), about the young vigilante who shot three unarmed men, killing two of them, at a demonstration against police violence.

Martha I. Chew Sánchez's *Corridos in Migrant Memory* (2006) explains in depth the many negative stereotypes of Mexican men and women in North American culture, which perpetuate The Myth of Mexico as The Land of Lawlessness:

> In general, Mexicans in the United States have been stereotyped as a problematic minority. Mexican and Mexican American men have been portrayed as backward, corrupt, dishonest, incompetent, dirty and lazy... For the most part, Mexican and Mexican American women have been portrayed as ignorant cantina dancers and prostitutes. The general representation of Mexico, moreover, is characterized by political scandals, corruption and violence, in the land of lawlessness and no accountability, where white college students can be wild and get drunk on tequila during spring break. Mexico is blamed for many of the social and economic problems the United States is experiencing (such as drug consumption and economic crisis) and sometimes for what has been perceived as a 'cultural crisis of Western civilization' due to the strong presence of Mexican and Mexican cultural expressions in the United States. (2006, 7)[7]

A survey of recent American political rhetoric denigrating immigrants with negative stereotypes, especially the campaign and rally speeches of right-wing populists, shows that little has changed over the eighteen years since Chew Sánchez's book was written.

Chew Sanchez notes the historical origins of the stereotypes, as well as the ways that fiction, songs, and films have decontextualized and generalized them, thus generating examples of The Myth of The Righteous Outlaw from real, living characters:

> Since the end of the nineteenth century, Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been represented in a decontextualized way, often as *bandidos* (bandits). Bandido images have been the staple of westerns that portray Mexicans as border outlaws, thieves, smugglers, and horse and cattle rustlers. Many of these portrayals are based on the legendary figures that appeared soon after the Mexican-American War (Elfego Baca, Juan Cortina, Gregorio Cortéz, and Tiburio Vásquez), those who were present during the gold rush in California (e.g. Joaquín Murrieta), and of course, Pancho Villa and other revolutionaries. Interestingly enough, a rich corpus of corridos is based on those social bandits who sought to defend Mexicans and

[7] Such stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans were common in mid-twentieth century Hollywood films such as *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), and Italian-American spaghetti Westerns such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). "Spaghetti Western" is a derogatory term U.S. critics used for foreign-made films, likely because they were upset by the way that directors such as Sergio Leone manipulated the stereotypes of U.S.-made westerns from a non-American perspective: "Leone wanted to show how vile the people of his film were and he even makes the hero only slightly less evil than the villains. Thus revolutionizing the western anti-hero" (Korano, "The Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone" (2011, https://www.spaghetti-western.net/index.php/The_Spaghetti_Westerns_of_Sergio_Leone).

> Mexican Americans against the loss of lands, murders, lynchings, economic exploitation, and oppression that accompanied the rise of white American cultural, economic and political ideals. (2006, 16)[8]

From this perspective, Mexican outlaws were justified in their actions as a means of self-defence against predatory white Americans, thus bringing the negative stereotypes more into line with their American outlaw counterparts.

Edberg notes that cultural personae such as that of the narcotrafficker are taken out of context so that they become "symbolic units in a social language (discourse) of self, such that individuals 'populate' the symbols and make them their own" (2004, 123). This is a way of using myths to construct national and cultural identity:

> The narcotrafficker persona as represented in narcocorridos and the proliferation of narcofilms owes a great deal to cultural imperialism from the characters in American westerns, the John Wayne and Clint Eastwood stereotypes…. 'The narcos tried to be norteños in a sense new in Mexico, one that didn't exist before the 1960s, norteños like John Wayne or the Marlboro Man or Clint Eastwood….' (2004, 123)

Another aspect of cross-cultural borrowing in these songs is the way each side assimilated not only thematic but also musical elements from the other, for example, the Spanish guitar in "El Paso," Marty Robbins's ballad of an American outlaw. There is an equivalent borrowing in Robert Rodriguez's rock guitar track in Tex-Mex band Chingon's adaptation of the traditional Mexican ballad, "Malaguena Saleroso" (2004).[9] Such borrowings can be an homage, or they can be theft, as Bel Jacobs explains in "What Defines Cultural Appropriation?" (*BBC News* 2022).

A corrido that illustrates the theme of the justified rebel battling a corrupt society as seen in the Myth of the Righteous Outlaw is the nineteenth-century "El Corrido de Joaquín Murietta." Murietta travelled to California with his wife to work his brother's gold claim, only to watch his brother murdered, his wife raped and murdered, and to be himself beaten and driven off his claim (Leal 1995; Canales de Zamora and Evans 2002). He formed a gang and returned to exact revenge. As Carlos Velez-Ibáñez describes it,

[8] Stereotypes of Mexican and Mexican-American "Robin Hoods" appear in several recent American films, such as Robert Rodriguez's *Desperado* (1995) and Rodriguez and Ethan Maniquis's *Machete* (2010).
[9] Included on the soundtrack of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 2* (2004). The film director, Robert Rodriguez, is also a musician.

> Murietta became a mythic hero in the minds of Mexicans who needed a hero-myth as much as Anglos needed the mythic villain. The former was composed of all the social values a suffering population needed: innocently wronged, valorous, hard-working, a man of the earth digging out the earth's riches with his hands, able to withstand hardships of the chase by rapacious Anglo sheriffs and rangers, skilled and cunning with the ability to out-strategize superior numbers, and finally never to be caught or defeated. (1996, 101)

Accompanied by traditional instruments, including the bajo sexto and accordion, with modern additions including drums and electric bass, corridos are an enduring form of popular music. Gary Hartman points out that "In many ways these 'outlaw corridos' are not so different from popular English-language ballads that glamorize notorious criminals such as Frank and Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, and Pretty Boy Floyd" (2008, 36). Hartman's encyclopaedic history of Texas music of all genres makes an important distinction between "folk" and "commercial" music that applies equally to the genre of the Mexican corrido: "music can be divided into two general categories: 'organic' and 'super organic'… As an important part of the community's cultural vocabulary, organic music is used in a variety of rituals, including births, deaths, courtship, marriage, religious ceremonies, work, planting, harvesting, hunting, warfare and politics." Most scholars and listeners would call this "folk" or "traditional" music, in contrast to "pop" or "commercial" music, which Hartman defines as "superorganic": "Superorganic music, on the other hand, does not evolve naturally over time as an organic expression of a particular community's culture. Instead, it is most often created and manipulated in order to produce a marketable commodity... and there is little, if any, organic relationship between the musicians and their audience" (2008, 13). Both "organic" and "superorganic" music have similar effects, however. If they become popular, they become internalized and can be used to communicate widely accepted motifs that codify and exemplify cultural mores and beliefs.[10]

Music, Power, and Politics

Music serves multiple purposes including entertainment, advertising, and propaganda (Mohar and Kennedy 2024). Political regimes around the world have long recognized the power of music to create and manipulate feelings of national and cultural identity. Crooke et al. note "the potential of music to be used for

[10] Examples include songs used at political rallies, often in defiance of the express wishes of the copyright holders, and often where the lyrics of the songs bear no relation to the message they are being used to convey. See Mohar and Kennedy (eds.) *Words, Music and Propaganda* (2024).

nefarious purposes, but also how such purposes may be linked to larger social processes" (2023, 34).

Such strategies have been used in both North and Central America. American broadcasting conglomerates blacklisted various groups and songs for their criticism of President Bush after 9/11, and many protest songs and singers during the Vietnam war (McCoy 2013). Joseph Hudak lists a number of patriotic-themed country songs recorded and released in the U.S. after 9/11, including several that called for violent retribution (2021).[11] Similarly, Mexican state governments pressured broadcasters into banning the playing of narcocorridos (thus creating a demand for underground distribution of recordings). In "Power Needs Names: Hegemony, Folklorization, and the Viejitos Dance of Michoacán, Mexico" (2005), Ruth Hellier-Tinoco explains how the Mexican government used its power over broadcasting and cultural funding to promote a politicized version of national and cultural identity through music:

> In Mexico there is an indexical correlation between 'folklore' and 'indigenous peoples.' Such classification and classificatory processes are part of a complex web of power relations in which there is a romantic valorization of artistic practice of the diverse peoples labelled as 'indigenous,' while the people themselves continue to live in marginalized and repressed situations. The predominance of a romantic, idealistic, 'folkloric' image of such peoples is diffused and perpetuated through the use of music and dance as tools of control (2005, 48).

Hellier-Tinoco sums up the mechanism: "governments and institutions are necessarily implicated in the promotion and manipulation of 'folklore' as a tool for purposes linked with identity-construction, unification, and nationalization, and as such how it is it intrinsically connected with control and power relations" (2005, 52). Steven Feld describes the process of hegemonic folklorization as one in which dominating outside parties legitimate condensed, simplified, or commodified displays; invoke, promote, and cherish them as official and authentic custom; and at the same time misunderstand, ignore, or suppress the real creative forces and expressive meanings that animate them in the community (1988, 96).

[11] One such song, Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue," was "performed at events for President George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. In 2021, Trump awarded him a National Medal of the Arts" (O'Kane, Caitlin. *CBS News*, February 6, 2024).

Cultural Symbols in North American Music

Marty Robbins

Marty Robbins was an American singer/songwriter whose biggest hit, "El Paso" (1959), is a romantic version of the American cowboy ballad featuring an outlaw and set on the Texas/Mexico border. The song embodies the romantic vision of the Old West, featuring an outlaw hero who dies for love. The protagonist is an American cowboy who falls in love with Felina, a Mexican waitress. He kills a rival in a duel and flees but is drawn to return to her. When he arrives, he is shot and killed by a posse. Like other American cowboy songs, and Mexican Norteño songs, it glamorizes the outlaw figure; in this case, his illegal actions, killing his rival and stealing a horse, are motivated by love. Although a killer and a robber, he belongs to the category of The Righteous Outlaw: he is seen sympathetically, as he was motivated by love. His last words are like the parting words in a Shakespearean tragedy: "From out of nowhere Felina has found me/Kissing my cheek as she kneels by my side/Cradled by two loving arms that I'll die for/One little kiss, then Felina good-bye."

There are two Latin American elements in the song, the flirting Mexican girl, and the Spanish guitar accompaniment. Addie Moore notes that "El Paso" is "among the great songs about the Old West, a nod to Mexico's influence on English-speaking country stars and an earlier example of a country song with crossover pop appeal" (2021). He continues:

> It's an early example of American country music's lyrical obsession with Mexico. While more recent stars look South of the Border to tell stories about drunken hedonism and hiding from the law (see everyone from George Strait and Waylon Jennings to Tim McGraw and Toby Keith for examples), Robbins went a more classy and classic route.

Los Lobos

Los Lobos is a Mexican-American band from Los Angeles, California whose album *How Will the Wolf Survive* contains several rock songs with Mexican themed lyrics, several traditional Mexican-styled songs, and several songs with Spanish lyrics. Their repertoire continues to be a mix of American and Mexican styles. This adherence to traditional music is a strategy to resist the commodification of people and their

culture (Kennedy and Gadpaille 2017). Their music combines elements of rock and roll, Tex-Mex, country, folk, and traditional Mexican music, and it has received positive critical and popular attention:

> Mixing the soul of rural Mexican music with good-rocking American roots, *How Will the Wolf Survive?* is one of the best records of 1984. Singer David Hidalgo, who will break your heart with two gorgeous tunes called 'Will the Wolf Survive?' and 'A Matter of Time,' sounds a lot like Fifties Chicano rocker Ritchie Valens: he's got the same romantic, plaintive tenor" (Miller 1985).

"Will the Wolf Survive?" is a rock and roll song with English lyrics that convey one of the main themes of Norteño music, the struggle of illegal immigrants from Mexico to survive and prosper in the United States, as seen in the line: "running scared and forced to hide/In a land where he once stood with pride." This statement reflects two central concepts outlined in Claudia Sadowsky-Smith's *Border Fictions: Globalization, Empire, and Writing at the Boundaries of the United States* (2008). First is the concept of dependency: "Dependency theory argues that Latin American nations are underdeveloped not because of inherent defects or historical 'backwardness' but because of their specific position in a world economic system that keeps them dependent" (2008, 8). Mexican workers pride themselves on their ability to work hard, but, finding no work at home, are forced to cross the border illegally to take low-paying jobs in the United States. Sadowsky-Smith notes that the U.S.-Mexican border has become increasingly militarized, while simultaneously American industries, especially agriculture, depend on migrant workers. Veléz-Ibáñez describes this as the "commodification" of the Mexican population and its labor (1996, 7). A second important concept is that of "U.S. hegemony in the cultural, political and economic realms" (1996, 12). Economically, Mexican workers are forced to seek work in the United States. NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) opens the borders to products but keeps them closed to people; exploited and at the same time marginalized, politically, they are excluded, but economically, they are necessary.

"Serenata Norteña," also from *How Will the Wolf Survive*, is a traditional norteña song; the Spanish lyrics are a love song with reference to Norteña themes and culture: "Y te juro que no miento/Pues jamas un buen norteno/Habla sin tener hono" (I swear that I am not lying/For never a good Norteño/Speaks without his honour). There are also references to the Northern Mexican locations Nuevo Leon, Matamoros,

Reynosa and Rio Bravo, with the summary statement, "It is pure tradition," and a final meta-reference to the style of the song itself, "here in the North, the accordion reigns."

Los Lobos's norteña songs and their English-language rock songs illustrate one of the principles enumerated by Rice: "Music can also challenge powerful social institutions from positions of structural weakness. It can help to form communities where none have existed before, and to activate change in the underlying cultural assumptions and social structures of a society" (2014, 46).

The voice of the Norteño is heard in the last verse of "How Will the Wolf Survive?":

> Sounds across the nation
> Coming from your hearts and minds
> Battered drums and old guitars
> Singing songs of passion
> It's the truth that they all look for
> Something they must keep alive

These lines encapsulate the main theme of Norteña, that music creates and preserves cultural identity.

Los Tigres del Norte – the Latin American Outlaw as Villain

Los Tigres del Norte are a Mexican-American band who reside in California. The members of the band are all from Mexico, but on a tour of the United States in 1968, their passports were stolen by the tour organizer, and they were stranded in California, where they settled down. Their music is popular among Spanish-speaking Americans, as Larry Rohter notes in *The New York Times*: their songs appeal to the immigrant audience because they are sympathetic to the plight of migrant workers:

> Though they have made more than 50 albums and sold millions of records in their 45 years together, Los Tigres are all but invisible to mainstream English-speaking America. But to the country's growing Spanish-speaking population—especially the many Mexican and Central American immigrants who do the scut work in fields, construction sites, factories and hospitals—they are idols who sing, from personal experience, of trying to make a new life in a strange new country. (Rohter 2014)

Many of their songs deal with outlaws and drug dealers, but as Rohter notes, in one way they differ from most other songs in the genre: "What makes Los Tigres' songs about drug smuggling different… is that 'the bad guys get their comeuppance'" (2014). "Muerte Anunciada" (Vargas Jimenez 1994) is a narcocorrido about the pursuit and death of Columbian drug trafficker Pablo Escobar. The first verse sums up the story: "Era una muerte anunciada, desde que gano la cima/Puso el mundo de cabeza, "El Zar de la Cocaína"/Pero cayó en Medellín, Don Pablo Escobar Gaviria" (It was a death foretold, since he won the summit/He turned the world upside down, "The Cocaine Czar"/But he fell in Medellín, Don Pablo Escobar Gaviria). Rohter notes another major difference between Los Tigres del Norte and other bands in the genre: "the Mexican regional music scene is increasingly dominated today by younger bands singing 'narcocorridos' glorifying the drug lords who have brought havoc to Mexico, and the Hernández brothers are alarmed by the tone of those songs" (Rohter 2014).

Los Tucanes de Tijuana – the Latin American Outlaw as Antihero

Los Tucanes de Tijuana (1987-present) are a popular Norteño band with 12 Grammy nominations in the United States and numerous awards in Mexico. In addition to traditional corridos, they are famous for their narcocorridos, such as "El Benefactor de Colima" (1995) and "El Diablo" (1997). These songs modernize the themes of traditional corridos to describe the lives of modern-day drug producers and traffickers similar to the cowboy ballads of American music, which celebrate the freedom of outlaws and gunfighters. In these songs, the narcotraficantes are heroes who combat corrupt politicians and police officers, until inevitably dying tragically in a hail of bullets. The first verse of "El Diablo" shows this:

Era un hombre de veras valiente	He was a brave man
Se burlaba de la policia	He made fun of the police
A su mando traia mucha gente	At his command he brought many people
Su negocio se lo requeria	His business required it
Poderoso y tambien muy alegre	Powerful and also very happy
Como "el diablo" se le conocia	As "the devil" he was known

Contrast this to the lyrics of "Soy de Durango" (2002) which tell the story of a tough man, perhaps, but not explicitly a drug trafficker:

Soy buena gente a la Buena	I am a good person
Pero muy malo a la mala	But very bad in a bad way
El ke se pasa de listo	The one who goes too far
Kon su pellejo me paga	With his skin he pays me
Mi super solo dispara	My super just shoots
A la frente y a la cara	To the forehead and to the face

In the town in Mexico where he lives, Culiacan, "La ley es de primitivo," (the law is primitive), and his violent nature makes him popular there, especially with women. Even these extreme statements of Mexican identity have made it into American mainstream consciousness: "Recently, *narcocorrido* (a Mexican genre dedicated to chronicling Mexico's ongoing drug war) made an appearance in the AMC's *Breaking Bad* (season 2 episode 7, "*Negro y Azul*")—immortalizing the deplorable acts of Walter White in song" (Kjorness 2013).

This is an apt borrowing of a cultural trope, since the fictional Walter White has become a quintessential example of the Righteous Outlaw: a middle-class white American anti-hero driven to lawbreaking by an uncaring capitalist society after being betrayed by his business partners and then being diagnosed with cancer. Several episodes in the series show his uneasy and violent dealings with a Mexican narcotraficante named Tuco Salamanca. Ironically, after leaving his business, Walter becomes a chemistry teacher;[12] in Los Tucanes' "El Diablo," the main character is also described as a teacher.

ZZ Top – The Ironic Mexican Outlaw

ZZ Top's "El Diablo (de Mexico)" (1976) is an American version of the corrido. Building on a long tradition of American gunfighter ballads, such as the traditional "Streets of Laredo" and "El Paso" (1959), this one differs in that it features a Mexican outlaw as protagonist. It presents an American perspective on the *mojado* ("wetback"), not as a freedom-seeking hero (see Ragland 2009, 140–1), but as outlaw and bandit. Like Escobar in "Muerte Anunciada," he meets his fate at the hands of the law:

[12] In the first episodes he is a high school chemistry teacher; when he "breaks bad" he becomes the mentor to a former student, whom he teaches how to make methamphetamine.

He was caught, he was bound
In La Casa de Calaboose
He was tried, he was found
And readied for the noose
But the break he would make
It didn't turn out so well
And the hombre called Diablo
Bid his last farewell

ZZ Top often celebrate outlaws in songs such as "Beer Drinkers and Hell Raisers" (1973), and "Arrested for Driving while Blind" (1977), although their lyrics are usually ironic, as exemplified in "Sharp Dressed Man" (1983); this one, however, paints the picture of a Mexican outlaw from the American perspective; the treatment of the main figure is sympathetic, however.

El Diablo is not exactly a sympathetic character; he is a gambler and a gunslinger, but there is no mention of any higher motive; there is no Robin Hood subplot. In this, he is similar to Joe in Billy Roberts' murder ballad "Hey Joe," who kills his wife in a fit of jealousy and then escapes the law by running to Mexico: "I'm going way down south/Way down to Mexico way, alright/I'm going way down south/Way down where I can be free" (1965), reinforcing the North American mythical stereotype of Mexico as a Land of Freedom, a lawless place, a haven for murderers and criminals.[13]

Conclusion

The rise in popularity of Latin American music worldwide can be attributed to several factors, including demographic change in hitherto majority English-speaking countries, but also to the rise of "crossover" artists, who present an initially exotic spectacle to the mass market, but over time become normalized. Artists such as Los Lobos, for example, appeal to the mainstream rock and roll market, and their catchy tunes and musical virtuosity attract listeners and introduce them to new kinds of music that they would not otherwise have encountered.

[13] Hollywood films such as *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (dir. George Roy Hill, 1969) use this stereotype; two likeable but unrepentant bank robbers flee to Bolivia to escape the law and a posse of private detectives but are finally caught and killed by the Bolivian army.

Annie J. Randall offers an insight into the process of mythmaking that results in popular songs that eclipse their origins in "The Censorship of Forgetting: Origins and Origin Myths of 'Battle Hymn of the Republic'" (2005). She begins by quoting a seminal insight of Roland Barthes:

> Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, History evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from…. [T]his felicitous figure … removes from sight … all soiling traces of origin. (Barthes 1957, 151)

Randall analyses the way the historical account of John Brown's 1859 attack on Harper's Ferry, an action that would be labelled a hate crime or terrorist attack today, was transformed by selective retellings of the story and elevated into a national anthem. Barthes' essays provide many examples of how this transformative process works, and the process can be seen in American, Mexican, and Mexican-American songs and stories. The process of mythmaking takes a local hero, antihero, or villain, and builds a story around the character that offers universal appeal.

Songs from both sides of the border and both languages are similar in this respect: traditional American stereotypes of the good guy in the white hat, usually a lawman, versus the baddie in a black hat are ironically inverted when the law, and the lawman, are perceived as corrupt, and the outlaw is portrayed as a freedom fighter. In songs from south of the border, corridos and narcocorridos, the hero is a hardworking Mexican immigrant fighting injustice, often in the form of racism, while trying to provide for his family, thus upholding traditional values, even in the case of narcocorridos. In music, "outlaw" proves a borderless concept.

The outlaw is a central figure in North and Latin American mythology. Children learn in school that the United States was founded by pilgrims and pioneers fleeing oppressive regimes to find freedom in a new land (and ironically setting up their own oppressive regimes). In popular films, television shows, and songs, the outlaw has long been portrayed as an antihero, a good person driven to lawbreaking by corrupt authorities. In the real world, we see examples every day of powerful figures taking advantage of the widespread appeal of this myth. It is one of the ironies on display in a divided society that the outlaw myth can be applied negatively to members of minorities perceived as The Other, while simultaneously being applied positively to

members of the controlling group. The deeper irony is that such universal themes are still used to divide and separate.

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