

NARCOCORRIDO, Chapter 13:

The Professionals: Reynaldo Martínez and the Balladeers of the Border

(This is a slight reworking of a chapter cut from *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*, by Elijah Wald, and takes up the story after a late-night party at the Monterrey home of corrido composer Julián Garza. It is © 2001 by Elijah Wald.)

“The people who buy corridos are those who scrub the floors, who hammer the nails and paint the walls. That is who makes corridos famous, so one has to use a very special language in them, because those people are not very cultured. The corrido, it is not exactly that it is uncultured, what happens is that if I write, ‘Ya todos sabían que era pistolero’ [‘Everyone already knew that he was a gunfighter,’ the first line of the corrido ‘Gerardo Gonzalez’], the doctor, the lawyer, the engineer know what I am saying, and also the carpenter and the street sweeper. I write for the people, and everybody knows what I am trying to say.”

--Reynaldo Martínez

Even if I had not been hung over, I was not really ready for the border. I had been to Tijuana, but only for a few hours. Anyway, Tijuana is different; a creation of the gringo trade, it has little about it to suggest a past beyond its Prohibition-era heyday as a free port of flesh and inebriants. Reynosa is different. In the center, it feels like a quiet Mexican town, with few foreigners visible and few businesses catering to them. It is only when one notices that the meztizo family eating tacos at the next table is speaking English that one realizes that this is not Jalisco or Zacatecas. Here, the border came after the river, which had already made the Valley a fertile and attractive place to live before the treaty of Guadalupe made it an international dividing line.

The divide is still only partial; border dwellers move freely back and forth, and Reynosans take dollars or pesos with equal pleasure. On purely subjective grounds, I was even inclined to

say that the Mexicans have gotten the better part of the deal. Reynosa is a thriving market town, with a bustling cross-border trade in everything from tourist tchotkes to consumer goods. The center of its Texas counterpart, McAllen, is a rundown strip of used clothing stores. Admittedly, this is not a fair comparison, since Texas towns have ceased to have centers in the traditional sense. Texans -- whether white, brown, black, or purple -- drive cars, and all the more prosperous businesses and nicer houses are scattered well away from the faded downtown areas. Not having a car, I had no inclination to be fair, and one hop across the border was enough. The main thing I got out of it was a glimpse of the face Reynosa presents to the gringo daytrippers: for about three blocks, as one enters from the international bridge, the town seems to be nothing but cut-rate dentists, pharmacies offering bargains on viagra, and a half-dozen gaudy nightspots.

I had originally come into town from the other side, the noisy, busy streets around the bus station, and had walked up to the main square. I liked the town, especially after the urban grey of Monterrey. It had a neighborly, small-town feel, and the "tourist guide" who tried to hustle me a hotel ended up giving me contact numbers for corrido people at the local radio station. I already had the name of a hotel, a pleasantly run-down place on the southwest corner of the main square, which was clean and quiet and cost roughly half what I had been paying at the Roosevelt. I settled in, then made a survey of the half-dozen record stores lining the street between the square and the market. Music is a brisk cross-border commodity, with dealers coming over in vans to stock up on the cheaper Mexican pressings, which they will sell illegally to Latino buyers on *el otro lado*. It seems like the perfect self-referential ballad theme: someone needs to write "The Corrido of the Corrido Smugglers."

If I really wanted to pursue the matter, it would be easy enough to find a corridista to execute the commission. The Valley is prime norteño country and writers abound. Though Reynosa has none of the music industry clout of Los Angeles or Mexico City, or even of Monterrey, it is home to three of the top contemporary composers: Reynaldo Martinez, Beto Quintanilla, and Juan Villareal. Of the three, Reynaldo Martinez is the old master. At 61, he is a

contemporary of Paulino Vargas and Julian Garza (who at some point in the cocaine and alcohol fogged night had delivered a powerful testimonial to Reynaldo's art), and his songs show equally deep roots in the tradition. They include classics like "Gerardo Gonzalez," "El Federal de Caminos" (The Highway Patrolman), and "Adios, Penal de la Loma" (Goodbye, Prison of la Loma) as well as two of the most famous early narcocorridos, "Polvo Maldito" (Damned Powder) and "Entre Hierba, Polvo, y Plomo" (Between Grass, Powder, and Lead), but he is not living in the past. His corrido of Rafael Caro Quintero is the most popular of the drug lord's many ballads, and his rhymed biographies of other cartel leaders turn up on records by the hottest stars in the business, from Los Invasores de Nuevo León (who have recorded 45 of his songs) to the Sinaloan banda singer El Coyote.

I had gotten Reynaldo's number from the corrido researcher Francisco Ramos Aguirre. Francisco runs a small museum of Tamaulipan music in the state capital, the mountain town of Ciudad Victoria, and has published a fine book on the state's corridos. The book's biographical section opens with a picture of Reynaldo, holding one of the prize fighting cocks that have earned him the soubriquet, "El Gallero" and inspired one of his most popular songs, "El Hijo del Palenque" (The Son of the Cockpit). I called him up, and he agreed to meet me at a restaurant out on the Monterrey highway.

Reynaldo is a medium-sized, solidly built man, whose skin attests to long years spent outdoors in the prairie sun. He wore a white shirt and matching cowboy hat, and a gold ring on his right hand was adorned with a crucified Christ as long as his palm, which he normally clasps in his fist. He explained that he turns it to the outside of his hand to drive, and puts it under his pillow to sleep, and that he has had it for 26 years. He surprised me by citing the precise date when he bought the ring, and as the conversation went on he gave equally exact dates for virtually every event he mentioned. I would find this to be true of other border corridistas as well, and it must be more than a coincidence; though most are now literate, they still have the skills that have always been vital to oral historians, from Malian griots to medieval bards.

Reynaldo says that he has always had a talent for songwriting, but he did not take to it as a profession until he was in his thirties. His first ambition had been to be a baseball player, and he came to the border from his home rancho near Ciudad Victoria in 1957 to pursue that career. He had some success with a local team, then was picked up by a scout from Denver, Colorado, where he stayed for a year, playing second base and occasionally pitching. Unfortunately, he broke his foot during a game and had to come home: “Me pichó mal el destino, me lanzó una curva.” (“Destiny sent me a bad pitch, it threw me a curve.”)

Back in Reynosa, he taught school for a while, then got a job in a refaccionaria, before going into music. As with Julián, he says that it was others who urged him to become a full-time composer: Ramón Ayala had split with Cornelio Reyna and needed new songs to jump-start his solo career, and Reynaldo was contacted by Servando Cano, the main promoter in Monterrey. It was perfect match: he supplied a string of songs that reinvented Ayala as a corrido singer, and Ayala made them part of Mexican folklore. Like Julián’s, Reynaldo’s work had a classic quality that appealed to traditionalists, and the older generation hailed him as a carrier of their mantle. His next break came when Victor Cordero, Mexico’s most respected commercial corridista, proposed him as songwriter for *La Dinastía de la Muerte*.

“They asked him to write the corrido for the movie, and to give them corridos that carried the lilt of the north, because the meter we give songs in the north is very different from what the people in the south make, or it’s the same meter, but here it is louder, faster, a bit more lively. They wanted it to have the lilt of the north because the Fierros are from the north, and Víctor Cordero -- may God have him in heaven, and I am very grateful to him for the place he gave me -- told them, ‘In Reynosa there’s a boy they call El Gallero’ (he called me a boy because he was older and established) ‘and he is the one who can do that for you, so go see him.’ ”

Reynaldo produced two classic corridos for the film, “Once Tumbas” (Eleven Graves) and “El Corrido de Daniel del Fierro.” He explains that the latter was actually written by his brother, Ismael, to a melody Reynaldo had composed for another song, a corrido of the Guerreran

guerrilla leader Lucio Cabañas. The Secretary of Public Education had banned songs about Cabañas, so they simply reworked the ballad to fit the more acceptable theme of a border killing:

Año del '69,	In the year of '69,
Yo quisiera recordarle	I would like to remind you
Que ha muerto Daniel del Fierro,	Daniel del Fierro died,
La tragedia he de contarles,	I must tell you the tragedy
Cayó en terrible emboscada	He fell in a terrible ambush
De unos falsos aduanales	By some false customs agents

Through the 1970s, Reynaldo continued to mine the rich vein of Tamaulipan pistoleros and valientes. There was, for example, his old friend Chito Cano: In 1966, Cano had been working as a taxi driver and Reynaldo had only a bicycle, so Cano was kind enough to drive him to his wedding for only four pesos. After Cano became famous as a gunslinger, Reynaldo wrote “El Retorno de Chito Cano” and Cano also gave him the idea for one of his most famous corridos:

“I went to visit him, because he was a prisoner. There was a fiesta in Victoria, and I went to eat with Chito, and Chito said to me there, ‘They killed some Highway Patrolmen and one was from Reynosa, don’t you think you should write them a corrido?’

“They had been killed on the thirteenth of January, and it was already the fifteenth. The fifteenth of January in Mexico, we celebrate the Day of the Composer -- I never celebrate it, because I don’t feel like a composer yet, I’m still running after the ball¹ -- and he had invited me to eat because it was the Day of the Composer. So we ate together there in the prison, and he was chatting with me, ‘Listen, look, check this out,’ and he showed me in the newspaper where they had killed these *Federales* in Zacatecas, and Javier Peña Tellez was from Reynosa.

“It happened that in March of that same year a *señor* who has since died, who was named Emilio de la Rosa, in the market, said to me, ‘Listen, some people are looking for you, they want you to write a corrido for the Highway Patrolman who was killed in Zacatecas,’

“He began to tell me the story, and I said to him, ‘Listen, sure, I know something about

that.'

“ ‘The thing is, he liked the corrido of Gerardo Gonzalez a lot, and because of that they are looking for you, they asked who wrote that corrido, because they want to see the man who wrote the corrido of Gerardo, and have him do one for Javier Peña.’

“ ‘Well, tell them to talk to me, or that I’ll come here.’

“His mother and father, the patrolman’s, talked to me, and I went to work on the corrido, and that same year Ramón Ayala put it out, and it’s one of the corridos that is most sung here on the border and in Mexico. We made two movies out of it, and for me it gives me great satisfaction that my corrido is the anthem of the Highway Patrol.”

At this point, Reynaldo’s cell phone rings, and I drink another beer while he makes arrangements to meet some people the following day. There is going to be a horse race in Valle Hermoso, a small town south of Matamoros, and he will be announcing the races and running a raffle, as well as perhaps singing a few songs. When he gets off the phone, I bring the subject around to narcocorridos. Reynaldo explains that his first corridos of drugs, “Polvo Maldito” and “Hierba, Polvo y Plomo,” he does not really regard as narcocorridos, since they are moral fables about the perils of the drug trade. However, he has also written a number of corridos of the top traficantes, hymning the deeds of Rafael Caro Quintero, Felix Gallardo, Hector “El Güero” Palma, and Juan García Abrego, “El Barón del Golfo” (The Baron of the Gulf).

As with most corridistas, he sees no harm in this, and compares it to other forms of journalism. He was more forthcoming than most, though, about the added economic component. We got to talking about a book project he wants to do, a collection of his corridos with the story of how each one came to be written, and I suggested that the most sensible way to manage such a project would be to publish it himself. “Yes, I could do that,” he said, sounding interested. “Rafael Caro Quintero would give me the money. He liked the corrido I wrote about him. I should go see him in Almoloya.”

I was a bit startled, not that Don Rafa should have appreciated the song, but that Reynaldo

would be so open about their possible business relationship. As far as he is concerned, though, this is simply the normal course of affairs. He is a celebrity, the narcos are celebrities; why would they not know each other? “I do not see anything wrong with that, because precisely one of these last months -- I don’t recall which -- a journalist from the north asked me if I knew Juan García Abrego. They were looking for him, and still had not caught him. I say, “ ‘Yes, yes I know him.’

“ ‘And why do you know him?’

“I say, ‘Because the *señor* enjoys the sport of kings, and so do I.’

“ ‘And what’s that?’

“ ‘The horse races, and that’s where I saw Juan. And he knew who I was, and I knew who he was. We said hello to each other, “Que pasó Juan ¿cómo estas?” ’

“ ‘Why have you never written him a corrido?’

“ ‘Because no one has asked me to. The day that the *señor* tells me to make him a corrido, I’ll do it for him, and it will be well done -- God willing that I don’t ever have problems that would make it come out any other way.’

As for the economics of the relationship, corridistas need not necessarily be paid by the protagonists (or the surviving relatives of the protagonists) of their songs. In the case of a figure like Caro Quintero, there is enough money to be made from the public. Still, as a general thing, corridistas were being paid for their services long before the narcos came on the scene, and Reynaldo takes this for granted. The parents of “El Federal de Caminos” gave him some money to memorialize their son. The family of Gumaro Vázquez, whose shooting in 1978 provided him with the theme of another hit song, paid him 20,000 pesos.

Of course, the money has gotten better with the arrival of the narcos, “Maybe they don’t pay you in cash, but they give you gifts that won’t harm you, because they say, ‘You know what? Look, take this, I am going to give you this car. Here is the title, look it over and see that it’s legal, this isn’t a stolen one, and I’ll make it over to you.’ So that’s all legal. If they give me

counterfeit dollars and say , 'You go to the cockfight and play with them,' I'm not going to have anything to do with that. Or if they say to me, 'Here, take this kilo of powder and you can sell it.'

“ ‘No, hold on.’

“But cars, yes. I have a car, a '90 Marquis, I still have it, one of my sons is driving it. A guy gave it to me when I made a corrido for him, if you've heard the corrido called 'El Capo de Michoacán' (The Mafia Boss of Michoacan).

“I think that all of this began to pay off when the mafia clans started to become fashionable, the groups that dedicated themselves to that stuff, who in one or another way wanted to make good. That was maybe the beginning of, for example, if someone comes to ask me, 'Listen, check this out, if you make a corrido for me, how much do you want?'

“ ‘How much are you going to give me? Because if you give me \$100, I'll make it for you right now, but I won't guarantee that it will come out well, because for \$100 I'm not going to wear out my pen.' ”

On that note, Reynaldo apologizes and explains that he has to leave early the next morning to get to the horse race. I am welcome to come, he adds, though his car is full and he cannot offer me a lift. If I do make it, he will introduce me to a man I might want to meet, he adds: Ricardo del Fierro, of the notorious Fierro family, a very good friend who comes often to the races.

Of course, I was on a bus to Valle Hermoso early the next morning, and, of course, no del Fierros showed up. Corrido heroes were proving more elusive than composers. The race was a touch of regional color, though, and I had no regrets about making the trip. It was held out in the country, down four kilometers of dirt road, and there was no racecourse in the big-city sense of the term, just a straight dirt track between rail fences. When I arrived it was around one o'clock. Pickups were pulling up and parking on the grass, and men in cowboy hats or baseball caps were standing around or sitting on low benches under the Corona beer tents. Corona had even supplied two rather chunky beauty queens in blue minidresses to add atmosphere, one dark and one blond. Other than the tents and beauty queens, everything looked pretty makeshift and improvised,

including the sound system, which was playing scratchy, accordion and saxophone huapangos.

Around 2:00 the races finally began. Reynaldo announced each one, briefly describing the horses as they were walked the length of the track and shut into the starting boxes. I could not understand a word, but the crowd seemed to be having no trouble. There were no official betting windows, or anything like them, so men wandered around with sheaves of pesos or dollars, finding people who would take the other side of their wagers. The races were arranged by pairs of horse owners, and seemed very well matched, though clearly the cognoscenti knew the favorites. On every race, Reynaldo told me which horse would win, and I could have made some decent money if I had gotten into the spirit of the occasion. As it happened, at first I did not care to gamble, and by the time I realized how reliable he was there were only a couple of races left and I could not figure out how to attract the attention of anyone to bet the other side. Reynaldo was betting regularly, apparently through proxies, as well as running a raffle. A bunch of young women went out selling chances, and there was a drawing between each race. All in all, he seemed to be making money hand over fist, but there was no band and no likelihood that he would sing, so I eventually decided I had seen enough, and headed back to Reynosa to talk with Beto Quintanilla and Juan Villareal.

When I had first crossed the border at Laredo, back in January, 1999, I had explained to the Mexican immigration officials that I needed a six month visa in order to pursue a study of the modern corrido. They found this very funny, and were quick to offer advice: “That means you’ll have to talk to Beto Quintanilla.” I had never heard the name, and rarely ran across it during my travels in the rest of the country, but as soon as I glanced through the Reynosa record store racks it was obvious that the cops were right. Every store had a dozen or two of Beto’s releases, and he was clearly my kind of singer: His album covers showed him with a pistol in his belt or a *cuerno de chivo* in his hands, and referred to him as “El Mero León del Corrido” (The Very Lion of the Corrido). When I bought a few cassettes, he turned out to be listed as composer on anything from half to all of the songs on each, and their themes ran from drug smuggling to shoot-outs to a new

Salinas corrido, “El Ratoncito Orejón” (The Little Rat with Big Ears). There was a Reynosa telephone number listed at the bottom of the cassette notes, and whoever it was that answered was happy to give me Beto’s office number. I called, spoke with his assistant, and was told he would be in later. When I called back he said I was welcome to come by and talk.

The office was in a small modern business complex a few blocks from the square, a stark room with nothing but a desk, a telephone, a couple of extra chairs, and framed posters of Beto’s album covers on the walls. People kept popping in and out of another, presumably more comfortable room, but I never got that far. The assistant fetched Beto out, and he seated himself rather stiffly behind the desk and announced that he was at my orders. Even when not wearing the black cowboy hat familiar from his pictures, Norberto Quintanilla looks like every Mexican’s image of a northerner. He is tall, well-built and light-skinned, with a thick black moustache, and looks considerably younger than his 50 years. The formality of the office setting emphasized the businesslike approach he brings to his career as a corridista, which has allowed him to make a good living over almost a quarter century in the music business despite his failure to find a national label or tour booker.

Born in the fabled General Terán, Beto had begun writing songs even before he came to Reynosa at age 14. He had never thought of being a singer, but his unique, gravelly singing style caught the ear of a local record company, and he made his first album in 1976. “I wrote other kinds of songs, boleros and romantic songs, but there was a lot of competition in that, and in corridos there wasn’t -- yes, there were corridos, but there was no one dedicating himself just to that. Los Tigres del Norte were starting out, with “El Carro Rojo” y “La Camelia,” more or less at that same time. And well, they had received the support of the record companies; I have almost always been on my own. The Tigres recorded those things with a lot of support from the company, and people began paying more attention to corridos, everyone wanted to do the same as them, because they hit, people wanted to go the same way, but not all have made it, and here I am -- going along slowly, but here we still are, I just recorded album number 24.”

Beto's speaking voice belies his businesslike demeanor. He mumbles his words together, and there is a distinctive, gravelly catch in his throat, the sound that makes his records instantly recognizable. His speech is much like his singing, inescapably "country," which may help to explain the limitations of his career. Rather than doing the international tours and huge concerts of the top stars, Beto works on the Mexican equivalent of the county fair and roadhouse circuit, playing at dances and cockfights up and down El Valle. "I have Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, some other areas, once in a while. I go to Houston, and Dallas as well, but it's to play for people from here, there are a lot of people who know of me, but I don't have anyone to represent me up there, once in a while they call me, that they've hunted me down, that they want to do something. Right now, the company tells me that I'm selling well in Chihuahua, Sonora, Sinaloa, many states already, but I don't have representatives there. The cassettes are selling, which means that people like them, and once in a while they call me, like this week I'm going to Durango, Saturday and Sunday, but they say that they struggled for months looking for me, and didn't know where to find me."

It is easy to imagine Chalino having fallen prey to the same problems if he had come out of Nuevo León rather than Los Angeles, but unlike Beto, he came along with his raw style at just the right place and time. Clearly, the same thought has occurred to Beto himself, and he has recently begun recording some of his cassettes with banda accompaniment in an attempt to capture the western market. The gamble has not paid off so far, in part because he does not have the musicians -- living so far from the banda region, he is forced to use a synthesized technobanda, and the result is less than satisfactory, but he is not sure it would be worth the cost to go to Sinaloa and cut an album with a group like Banda La Costeña, since he anyway could not carry them with him on tour.

In a sense, Beto's predicament mirrors that of Jose Alfredo Saucedo in Los Mochis, trying to write songs with northeastern-sounding heroes in an attempt to break into Beto's turf. Maybe they should team up. Or maybe each should be happy with his region, and not worry so much

about expanding. Still, it is easy to understand Beto's frustration; if he were a Sinaloan, he would be considered one of the grand old men of the west coast boom. His rough voice and gun-waving braggadocio are perfect for the western market, but here in the east they are a little too direct and modern for the mainstream. His songs do occasionally get covered by the more famous norteño stars, especially the corrido of "El Quemador" (The Burner), a pistolero shot down in Ciudad Victoria, which has been recorded by Ramon Ayala and Luis y Julián, but his own recordings are considered a specialty taste. They are for the heavy corrido fans, which is to say the traffickers and their admirers, and around here the traffickers are not the trend-setters the way they are out west.

Of course, Beto does not say straight out that he makes his living from drug lords. He is a cautious man, and even when discussing "El Ratoncito Orejón," he will only say "a lot of people say that it is about Salinas de Gortari, but I just say that it is about a little rat with big ears." He says that he never accepts direct payment for his songwriting, though he sometimes has received presents from the subjects of his corridos. Nonetheless, when I try to phrase the question diplomatically, mentioning that many people say that he must be "muy metido" (very much an insider) to be able to write so knowledgeably about the crime world, he does not deny the rumors: "I am an insider to a certain degree, I get inside because I want to find out about it, so I'll know what I am doing -- but that's just like what you are doing, you want to know about music, so you have to get inside that world, right? So yes, one tries to become an insider, to get close in order to see what's going on. Of course, without mentioning names. But that's where the ideas come from, from the things one gets to know about. It's like the journalists who go to bring news of a war, they have to go in, and the least they can say is, "How brave they are," right? But the journalist doesn't show his picture, his face, and we have to show ourselves, and maybe that's it, it's true that here we are insiders, because whoever talks about that is one who knows. But one gets close with that goal, to have the reality in the songs."

Beto has also written anti-drug songs, and he points out that the gunwielding album covers

(which, as each comes out, he reproduces as posters and business cards) are simply music business equivalents of the ads for a new Rambo movie. Still, he is known as the narcocorridista of the Valle, and it is simply his misfortune that the drug business here remains something relatively underground and unrespected.

It is a measure of the east's lack of appreciation for the drug-song boom that Juan Villareal will not even allow himself to be considered part of the narco boom. Of all the easterners, Juan has had the greatest impact on the current Sinaloan scene. I had seen his name listed as a composer on so many cassettes around Culiacán that I just assumed he was one of the regular writers of the post-Chalino narco wave, but my friends in the record store there had said that no, he was from somewhere around Monterrey. The somewhere turned out to be Reynosa, but I found that back home he was not thought of as a narco singer, or even really as a corridista. Along with his brother Jose, he came to Reynosa in 1965 with a group called Los Cachorros (The Puppies), and the young players established themselves as followers of the modern norteño style of Los Relampagos del Norte. Jose was killed in a car accident in 1972, but Los Cachorros de Juan Villareal, propelled by Juan's songwriting and accordion virtuosity, have remained among the most reliably popular second-tier norteño bands.

My third evening in Reynosa, Juan invited me over to his house. He greeted me at the door, then had a retainer lead me out to a chair by the swimming pool in the back yard and serve me a beer. After five minutes or so, Juan came around the side of the house, playing a polka on his white Gabanelli accordion. He is a rather comical figure, a small, chunky, cheerful man in sandals, a khaki short-sleeved shirt, and a floppy fisherman's hat. He is also one of the greatest accordion players I have ever heard. The players of the border region are generally acknowledged to be the best in the business, with a virtuoso command of their instruments that the Sinaloans rarely even aspire to. Juan talks of Italian instruction methods that most country players have never heard of, and says that he still spends an hour a day practicing formal exercises. He is friends with an elite group of serious masters, including people like the Texan

Steve Jordan, who play their normally limited, diatonic instruments in multiple keys, and have interests far beyond the basic norteño repertoire.

As a corridista, though, Juan is a traditionalist. “For me, the fundamental base is the historical corridos, for example of the Revolution. I wrote, reading a bit of the history of Doroteo Arango, that is, Pancho Villa, I came up with the facts that went:

En 1920	In 1920,
Jueves Santo en la mañana	Holy Thursday, in the morning
Salió Don Francisco Villa	Don Francisco Villa went out
De Torreón para Celaya	From Torreón towards Celaya

“I wrote a lyric about him, which has never been recorded, nothing has ever happened with it, I gave it to the Cadetes, who knows what my compadre, Lupe Tijerina, could do with this number. It says:

Por las derechas e izquierdas	On the right and left sides
Iban las caballerías	Went the cavalry
Por el centro de las tropas	In the center of the troops
Iban las infanterías.	Went the infantry
A que combate tan fuerte	Oh, what a fierce battle,
Señores daba temor	Señores, it was frightening
Pero más fuerte se oía	But more fiercely could be heard
El estragor del cañón	The devastation of the cannon.

“So I think about that, and I have always said that the corrido of the Revolution is the foundation. What we are doing now is what is happening, but I, in the lyrics that I write for corridos, I never mention drugs, no señor. For me, I don’t know, I don’t want to speak ill of my fellow composers, but I think about how we are injecting the drugs into the children who start out small, they like the corrido and they about it, on and on, until they become teenagers, and then, ‘Fine, let’s try out what these drugs are.’ And that’s bad. If we can prevent that, that that

happens to children, we are going to prevent it, no? But a lot of us look at it with the idea of making money, it doesn't matter who you are destroying, and we don't think that we also have children and we may be destroying our own, we haven't stopped to think about that, we composers. I talk of pistols, of the different cartels all over Mexico, but not for one moment do I talk of -- not one *décima* (verse) -- of this drug stuff."

My first thought is that Juan's protestations simply echo Mario Quintero and all the other west coasters, but as he keeps talking I am struck by the differences more than the similarities. His songs are certainly having great success among the Sinaloan narco crowd, sung by a battalion of Chalinitos, and he is now regularly traveling to Tijuana to provide movie corridos for the direct-to-video gangster films, but his songs do not wink at the drug trade -- they ignore it completely. To Juan, and I think to most eastern corridistas, the modern crime songs are not part of a new boom sparked by the Tigres and Camelia la Tejana; they are part of the old Wild West badman tradition, the "Pistoleros Famosos" enshrined in one of the most popular eastern corridos of the 1970s. To him, Chalino Sanchez was not a young homeboy who made it big in LA as court musician to the Sinaloan traffickers, he was an old-fashioned corridista, hymning the deeds of brave gunmen. Chalino's songs never mentioned drugs, but in Sinaloa or LA the narco background of the shootings and parties was always taken for granted; along the Rio Bravo, they evoked a different, cleaner image.

That is, if shootings and knifings are assumed to be cleaner than drugs. Juan is so insistent on the moral virtue of his work that I cannot help recalling Paulino Vargas's closing remarks, and suggesting that pistols do as much harm as narcotics. "Well, yes," he says, pausing a moment. "I think that's true. But the pistol was left us by the Revolution. People say now, 'Why do you carry a pistol?'"

" 'I don't know, I remember that my grandfather carried a pistol, and that's why I carry one.'"

"So the next generation follows suit: 'I remember that my grandfather used to tell me that

his great-grandfather carried a pistol, that my great-great-grandfather was in the Revolution and never put away his pistol.’ We are sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, great-great-grandsons of the Revolution. So, I can put on a pistol, why? Because it gives me the feeling that I am being like my great-grandfather. That’s all right with me, but nothing about drugs or that sort of thing.”

In the local record stores, Juan has fewer cassettes than Beto, but he has managed to make the connections that Beto lacks. I have not seen Beto’s house, but I do not imagine it to be the size of Juan’s, with the large back yard, the swimming pool, and the shiny tour bus pulled up beside a second building that is under construction, but will soon house a private gym, complete with steam room and sauna. The gym serves two functions; first, it will help Juan take off some weight, something he feels impelled to do in view of his burgeoning film career. He is flying to Tijuana twice a year now, each time to make three quickie movies based on his corridos, and he is taking parts in each. He is not exactly becoming a movie star; when I ask if he plays the good guy or the bad guy, he says: “No, the guy who takes care of the horses. *El traidor: ‘Tráeme esto, tráeme ‘l otro’ -- por eso el traidor.*”²

Still, the movies are fun, and also a source of income and a way of keeping himself and his music in the public eye. While he is now in great demand as a composer, Juan has continued to do the first recording of each song himself, declining to step behind the scenes. For example, he has a new number, “El Cantante” (The Singer), about Chalino’s murder (and the, I presume, fictitious killing of the murderer), which he will record for a film in a few months. Already, he says, word has gotten out and the Chalinitos are all calling him: “There have been six, seven, eight calls a day: ‘Listen, I want to record your corrido and . . .’ ‘Listen, I want to record your corrido and . . .’ ‘Listen, I want to record your corrido and . . .’

“I say, ‘Yes, my boy, but hold on. I’ll give it to you, I swear that I will give it to you, but wait until I first record it myself. I have to do it first, and then you; that’s the way it has to be.”

The song itself begins with a bow to all these young puppies who are worrying the old dog:

Ahora sí mis Chalinillos,

Now is the time, my Chalinillos,

Vamos a cantar bastante	We will sing plenty
Pa' que escuches las canciones,	So that you can hear the songs,
El compa Chalino Sánchez	Of our pal Chalino Sánchez
Ya tumbaron al gatillo,	They have gotten rid of the trigger[man],
El que nos mató al cantante	The one who killed our singer

The other reason for the gym is Nestor Garza, a compact, handsome man in his mid 20s who has been sitting with some friends over by the barbecue grill for the last ten minutes of our conversation. Garza is the Super Bantamweight champion of the world, having just successfully defended his title in Las Vegas against a Venezuelan fighter named Carlos Barreto, and Juan intends the gym to double as Garza's private training camp. Ever the gracious host, Juan interrupts the interview to introduce us and take us on a tour of the construction. Then it is time to eat, a meal of grilled fish and nopalitos (cactus leaves) broken off the plants in the back of the yard, washed down with ice tea and Juan's stories of great border accordionists. I am interested in his take on the difference between the Mexican and Texas players, something that Texas music fans make much of, but that seems to me to be exaggerated. Juan agrees with the Texans that the styles are different, but instantly muddies the waters by adding that Ramon Ayala, the king of the northern Mexicans (though now living a few miles north of the river), is to his way of thinking more of a Texas style player.

Juan seems more relaxed and comfortable than most of the people I have interviewed. His career is going very well, and the success is steady and presumeably maintainable. He is not a superstar, but his songs are bringing him a tidy income: "The composer who has a hit, I don't know why he would go on being poor. You're going to be talking about some fifty, sixty thousand pesos per trimester, when the song is idling, when it isn't a hit -- but once there's a hit, you're talking about 200,000 pesos, 300,000 pesos per publisher. But that's without another that is even stronger than the publisher, which pays you twice as much, and that is called the Society of Authors and Composers, the SACM. For example, let's suppose that a publisher pays you

300,000 pesos, I would guess that SACM, how much would they give you? My God, they'll give you over 400,000 every three months.”

And that is just the songwriting royalties. When I ask if he is making more as a composer than as a performer, Juan chuckles and says the longest, most drawn-out “nooooo” imaginable. “No, no, no, no, because I’m talking about every three months, and I might make that much in a single show.” When one considers that he typically plays every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, that comes to pretty fair money. Right now, he is taking a sort of vacation, lounging around his backyard with his friends and family, but that is only because he is headed out on a six week tour that will start in Tijuana, then jump up to Oregon and Washington, and over to Idaho. “And if more gigs turn up, from there I might go to Chicago. Check this out, I have gone from Boise, Idaho, all the way to Miami, from corner to corner.”

It was getting late in the evening. Juan’s children had joined us, and he proudly presented his son, who played some guitar with him, as well as a daughter and little granddaughter. He passed me the guitar, and I played a little blues, then Juan played a few more tunes and explained that he needed to get some rest, as he had a lot of business to finish up before leaving on tour. He said he would meet me in the morning, though, and try to get me fixed up to meet Steve Jordan, the Texas mystery man.

¹. Reynaldo said “buscando la bolita,” looking for the little ball, which could translate idiomatically as “reaching for the brass ring,” or waiting to get lucky.

². This line is based on a pun, and therefore cannot be translated. “Traidor” is traitor, but could logically be the noun form of “traer,” to get; thus, Juan calls himself the traitor, a likely enough character in a gangster film, then twists it to mean the go-fer.