

Corridos: (Mostly) True Stories in Verse with Music

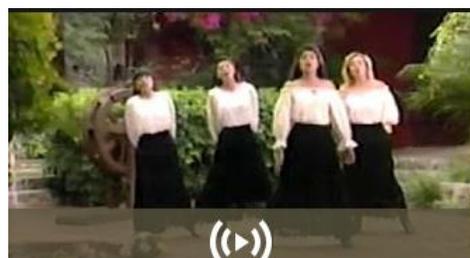
by Celestino Fernández

<i>Año de 1900</i>	The year 1900
<i>Presente lo tengo yo</i>	Is present in my mind
<i>En un barrio de Saltillo</i>	In a Saltillo neighborhood
<i>Rosita Álvarez murió</i>	Rosita Álvarez died
<i>Rosita Álvarez murió</i>	Rosita Álvarez died
<i>Rosita ya está en el cielo</i>	Rosita is now in Heaven
<i>Dándole cuenta al Creador</i>	Giving accounts to the Creator
<i>Hipólito está en la cárcel</i>	Hipólito is in jail
<i>Dando su declaración</i>	Giving his statement
<i>Dando su declaración</i>	Giving his statement

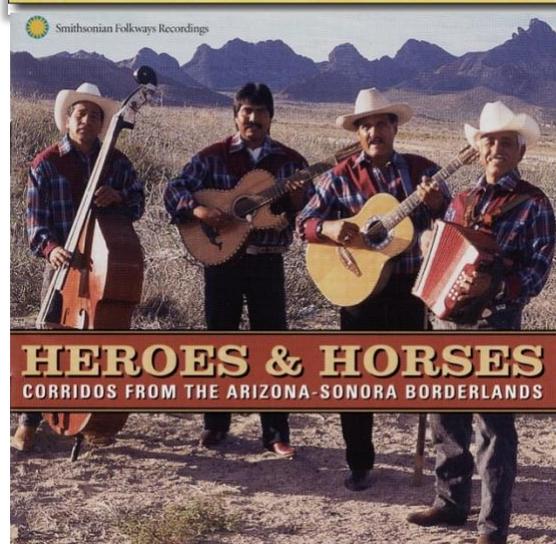
Imagine real-life events, from horse races to assassinations and other true stories, captured in rhythmic poetry and put to simple music. That is what *corridos* are, yet *corridos* are so much more. The two stanzas above are the first and last from “*El Corrido de Rosita Álvarez*.” This *corrido* relates a story that took place in Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico (Santos 2010) about the beautiful, 20- or so-year-old Rosita Álvarez who, despite her mother's warnings, went to a dance one night and ended up being shot by Hipólito, a drunk whose invitation to dance she had declined. This *corrido* is somewhat uncommon in that the last line is repeated and belongs to the Public Domain (PD) as the author is unknown, which was the case with most *corridos* in the past.

An important part of the Mexican and Mexican American oral tradition, *corridos* are a way of documenting the experiences of people who often have no other voice. They are always written from the perspective of *el pueblo*, everyday people (Fernández and Officer 1989).

Originally popular in central Mexico by the 1830s (Mendoza 1954), *corridos* also became common by the end of the 1800s along both sides of the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border (Paredes 1959). Today, they remain a popular means of documenting and remembering events about or inspired by life in Central Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, and wherever Mexicans and Mexican Americans reside.



There are over a hundred recorded versions of “*El Corrido de Rosita Álvarez*.” A rather harmonious version was recorded by Sparx, a New Mexico band composed of the four Sanchez sisters. This *corrido* also inspired three commercial films: *El Corrido de Rosita Álvarez* (1947), *Yo Fui Novio de Rosita* (1955), and *Destino Sangriento* (1982).



Border *corridos* albums on [Folkways](http://Folkways.org).

It should be noted that although the overwhelming majority of *corridos* are based on fact and inspired by real-life events, a few are not, even some famous *corridos* such as “*El Corrido del Caballo Blanco*.” Additionally, even factual *corridos* may contain errors in dates and names (which is even the case with official government documents throughout the world, including birth, marriage, and death records), or may include exaggerations and other distortions. Also, some *corridos* have inspired variants with additional or different stanzas from the original *corrido* (Paredes 1959). Still, the expectation from the audience is that *corridos* be factual, and it can be disappointing to learn that sometimes that is not the case.

Much like the editorial page of the local newspaper, the *corrido* takes a topic of importance and accurately (mostly) and poetically documents the essential points, interprets them (often through a moral lens), provides commentary, and may offer advice or recommendations (Griffith and Fernández 1988). However, the *corrido* always takes the point of view of the working class; it is from this perspective that an issue is documented, analyzed, and interpreted. In a world in which common people have little economic or political power and influence, cultural expressions such as *corridos* play an important role in amplifying the voice of *el pueblo*.

The ballad tradition of narrative folk songs is not unique to *corridos*. Throughout the world, including in England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, South America, the Philippines, and the U. S., for example, various forms of ballads have told the stories of the folk. However, the *corrido* tradition may be unique in its lasting, wide, and continuing popularity throughout Mexico and in the U.S. with Mexican Americans for over 150 years. The *corrido* is one of Mexico’s primary musical genres.

Because *corridos* generally are so detailed, they have been an important source of historical information along with other historical documents. Merle E. Simmons (1957), for example, uses *corridos* as source documents in his study of modern Mexico. Several *corridos* have preserved stories that otherwise would have been lost or only known locally. The stories in some *corridos* are so interesting that they have inspired commercial films such as *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* starring Edward James Olmos, *El Moro de Cumpas*, [La Carcel de Cananea](#), and *La Banda del Carro Rojo*, to name a few.

Corridos, the songs of the people, the ballads of Mexican music, have a long history of commenting on topics pertaining to the U.S.-Mexico border—usually on its activities and characters (see Folkways album covers). For example, “[El Moro de Cumpas](#)” documents the famous horse race that took place in Agua Prieta, Sonora, across the border from Douglas, Arizona, between the *Moro* (from Cumpas, Sonora) and the *Saino* (from Agua Prieta). Perhaps the best-known border *corrido*, “[El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez](#),” documents the heroic events of a Wild West “outlaw” near the Texas-Mexico border. The folklorist Américo Paredes wrote his celebrated book about this *corrido* and its many variants (Paredes 1959). “[El Corrido de Joaquín Murrieta](#)” explores the life of a man known as the Robin Hood of Mexicans in Southern California (Ridge 2018). There are literally hundreds of examples of border *corridos*.

Since *corridos* center on themes important to *el pueblo*, they are deeply influenced by the changing atmosphere of the border. For example, the prevalence of drug violence spurred creation of the subcategory *narcocorridos* (Holscher and Fernández 2003). Two of the most famous Norteño bands, Los Tigres del Norte and Los Tucanes de Tijuana, regularly focus on drug-related themes in their music. Since the mid-1970s, Los Tigres have rarely released an album without including at least one *narcocorrido*; they even recorded an entire album devoted to these songs as have Los Tucanes and many other performers. Because these *corridos* tend to glamorize the drug trade and negatively influence young men, they have been banned by radio stations in several cities, including Tijuana, Mexico. Yet they continue to be popular and several drug lords have commissioned *corridos* about them and their power and heroics; of course, such commissioned *corridos* always paint the *narcos* in a positive light.

The themes of *narcocorridos*, such as drugs, money, sex, continue in an emerging subgenre known as *corridos tumbados* that have quickly become popular with urban youth. These *corridos* are performed in rap style and in first-person; traditional *corridos* are performed in third-person. The performers dress in hip-hop style attire, including hats, tennis shoes and bling. The most popular composer/singer of *corridos tumbados* is 19-year-old Natanael Cano, originally from Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, and now residing in Los Angeles, California. He has become an overnight sensation, inspiring others to perform *corridos tumbados*, including Ivonne Galaz, the first woman to record such *corridos* on her album *Voy En Camino*.

Trapcorridos, performed with trap music, are a newer subgenre. The word “trap” has become a common prefix for hip hop-influenced subgenres, even if they do not share the qualities of trap music, which is characterized by sharp snares; booming bass; and hazy, minor-key melodies. *Trapcorridos* are primarily composed and performed by Mexican Americans around urban themes or personalities. Examples include Nipsey Hussle, the American rapper, activist, and entrepreneur killed March 30, 2019, outside his store (“[Corrido de Nipsey](#)”), and Kobe Bryant, the famous basketball player who died in a helicopter crash January 26, 2020 (“[Corrido del 24](#)”).

Popular Corrido Themes

The *corrido* has documented and provided commentary on a wide range of events and personalities of local, national, and international importance that remain in common memory (Fernández and Officer 1989). Although any topic may inspire a *corrido*, some themes have been covered extensively by this folk tradition (Fernández 2020), such as:

- Wars and armed conflicts: Most notably the Mexican Revolution is a subject, but so are WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War, and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Some of the best-known classic *corridos* are about the Mexican Revolution, such as “[Corrido Villista](#),” “*La Persecución de Villa*,” and “*Carabina 30-30*.”
- Immigration: These *corridos* discuss many aspects of the Mexican immigration experience: leaving the family in Mexico, details of the trip, crossing the border, encounters with the U.S. Border Patrol, migrant deaths in various forms (in the desert, automobile accidents, inside locked train boxcars, and in overcrowded trailers of semi-trucks). This author has collected over a hundred migration *corridos*.
- Folk heroes: Many folk heroes have been memorialized through *corridos*, including Gregorio Cortez and Fernando Valenzuela, a pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 1980s who was recruited from the Mexican state of Sonora and in his first year won the Cy Young and Rookie of the Year Awards. Various authors have discussed the archetypes of *corrido* subjects (Herrera-Sobek 1990).
- Personalities: Barack Obama’s 2008 candidacy drew worldwide attention since he was the first Black person with a chance of winning the U.S. presidential election and several [corridos](#) were penned and performed about him. Likewise, when Hillary Clinton was a candidate in 2015, the famous Mexican singer Vicente Fernández (no relation to this author) performed a [corrido](#) about her. Shortly after Michael Jackson died June 25, 2009, several [corridos](#) documented his life and death.
- Tragedies: Train accidents, earthquakes, and the terrorist acts that brought down the Twin Towers (“[Tragedia en Nueva York](#)”) are but a few of the tragedies reflected in *corridos*.
- Horses and horse races: Some of the most notable *corridos* on this topic include “[El Corrido del Caballo Blanco](#),” “*Caballo Prieto Azabache*,” and “*El Moro de Cumpas*.” There also are *corridos* that involve other animals such as heroic dogs, cockfights, and bullfights.
- Miraculous events: Two individuals associated with miracles depicted in *corridos* include Jesús Malverde and St. Toribio Romo. Malverde has a public shrine (he is not recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church) in Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico, and is credited as a Robin Hood character while alive and since the 1970s has been known as the “narco saint,” the “saint” of drug traffickers; he apparently helps them move drugs going north and deliver them to the U.S. St. Toribio Romo González (an official saint of the Catholic Church, canonized May 21, 2000) is said to appear to distressed migrants making their way across the U.S.-Mexico border and cures them as well as gives them food, water, money, and even directions. Today, St. Romo’s image can be seen everywhere, including on religious cards carried by immigrants. His shrine in Santa Ana, Jalisco, Mexico, is visited by 5,000 tourists and migrants every week.
- Assassinations: U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Mexican presidential candidate Donaldo Colosio (“[El Corrido de Luis Donaldo Colosio](#)”) are two conspicuous examples.
- Towns and regions: These *corridos* usually document, with much pride, the special characteristics and features of a town or state, for example, “*Corrido de Mazatlán*” and “[Corrido de Chihuahua](#).”

Corridos are of the moment; they capture and commemorate people or important events. For example, several were composed about the Covid-19 Pandemic, including “*El Corrido del Covid-19*” (Homero Guerrero, Jr., y Los KDTs de Linares) and “*Corrido del Coronavirus*” (Los Potrillos De Turicat). The 2020 killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and subsequent demonstrations against police brutality sparked throughout the U.S and across the world have also

been documented in *corridos*, including “*No Puedo Respirar / El Corrido de George Floyd*” (Ayala Band) and “*8 Minutos de Infierno*” (Pedro Rivera). “*El Corrido de George Floyd*” (Humberto Reyes el HR), is an eerie *corrido* sung acapella, clearly by a nonprofessional, that provides details of the killing of Mr. Floyd by the police, including the date, the policeman’s knee on his neck, and George’s pleas, “I can’t breathe,” as the following stanzas indicate:

<i>Un 25 de mayo</i>	A 25th of May
<i>En tierras americanas</i>	In the United States
<i>El racismo acabó</i>	Racism ended
<i>Con una vida humana</i>	With a human life
<i>El autor un policía</i>	At the hands of a policeman
<i>Y tres mas telamerada</i>	And three more of the same cloth
<i>“Ya no puedo respirar”</i>	“I can’t breathe”
<i>Aquel hombre pronunciaba</i>	That man said
<i>Ya por favor oficial</i>	Please, police officer
<i>La vida a mí se me acaba</i>	My life is ending/I’m dying
<i>Mas las suplicas, señores</i>	But the pleas, ladies and gentlemen,
<i>Nunca fueron escuchadas</i>	Were never heeded

Characteristics of Traditional *Corridos*

Although there are exceptions, there are clear patterns in the form and structure of *corridos*. Some of the more salient characteristics of the older, standard, more common *corrido* style follow (Fernández 2020).

- Perspective: Since *corridos* take the perspective of everyday people, they are composed in vernacular language, generally by well-informed observers, in some cases eyewitnesses, situated in or intimately knowledgeable of the culture of the working class.
- Meter and rhyme: Meter refers to the number of syllables in each line and traditional *corridos* are composed mostly in six or eight counts per line. Stanzas can be either four or six lines. If the verse is four lines, the rhyme scheme is ABCB, so the end of the last word of the second- and fourth-lines rhyme. If six lines, the rhyme pattern is ABCBDB, the last words of lines two, four, and six rhyme.

Four-line Pattern

<i>Las mujeres de mi tierra</i>	The women of my country
<i>No saben ni dar un beso</i>	Do not even know how to kiss
<i>En cambio las Mexicanas</i>	On the other hand, Mexican women
<i>Hasta estiran el pescuezo</i>	Even stretch their necks [to do so]
	–Stanza from “ <i>La Cucaracha</i> ”

Six-line Pattern

<i>Ya con ésta me despido</i>	With this I bid farewell
<i>Y si me voy, no es por mi</i>	And if I leave, it’s not because of me
<i>Es que tengo quien me compre</i>	It’s that I have someone who’ll buy
<i>En el pueblo, mi maíz</i>	My corn in town
<i>Al mejor precio del año</i>	At the best price of the year
<i>Que no paga el Chapulín</i>	That Chapulín won’t pay
	–Last stanza from “ <i>El Corrido de Don Chapulín</i> ”

- Length: Old-style *corridos* are long (20–30 stanzas), providing rich detail as they narrate an event. In fact, when *corridos* were first audio recorded, many did not fit on one side of a record, and it was common to record “Part 1” on one side and “Part 2” on the other. Now *corridos* tend to be much shorter (8–10 stanzas), easily falling within the standard time for songs aired on commercial radio.
- Opening, middle, and closing: The *permiso* (permission) and *despedida* (leave-taking or farewell) serve as markers to the performance, the bookends so commonly used in *corridos*. The *permiso* lets the audience know that they are about to hear a story and should pay attention to the words (McDowell 2000). Thus, many *corridos* begin by noting that, indeed, this is a *corrido*. Some familiar lines include *Este es el corrido* (This is the ballad) or *Señores, pongan cuidado* (Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears). Generally, the first stanza provides a setting by giving a specific date, place, or person. The middle is the longest section and relates the story details. Finally, the listener is frequently alerted that the story is coming to an end in either a penultimate or final stanza with the *despedida*, for example, *Así termina el corrido* (That’s how the *corrido* ends). Also, it’s in either the penultimate or last stanza that one may find the moral of the story. If the *corrido* has described death, the penultimate or the final stanza begins with *Vuela, vuela, palomita* (Fly, fly, little dove), referring to the spiritual afterlife.
- Performance space: Traditionally, *corridos* were performed wherever people gathered, such as plazas, *mercados* (marketplaces), and *ferias* (fairs). Even today, it is common to hear *corridos* wherever people gather, including in the *plazas* of large cities and at family gatherings.



Corrido performers in Summer 2010, Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico. The woman both played the *vihuela* (small, rounded-back guitar) and sang. The man in the wheelchair had a cast on his left ankle.

Photo by
Kim Fernández,
wife of the author.

- Singers: Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, *trovadores* (wandering singers) would reflect on the news of the day in their *corridos* as they travelled from town to town. They played mostly for tips, although some also sold broadsheets with the words of *corridos* they were performing. In earlier periods, broadsheets with lyrics to ballads were also common in England, France, Spain, and other parts of the world, often with artistic borders and printed lyrics (see broadsheets below).

Although historically males overwhelmingly have been the composers and singers of *corridos*, women also have been involved in all aspects of the tradition, as composers, musicians, and performers (see the photograph above). Even today, one can see married couples performing *corridos* in plazas and marketplaces in Mexico; however, seldom is a woman street *corrido* performer seen alone. Additionally, women have been the protagonists of numerous *corridos*.



Examples of two *corrido* broadsheets. “*Los Siete Fusilados*” is from 1902 and “*Corrido de la Revolución de México*” is from 1913. Public Domain.

- Singing style and accompaniment: Because *corridos* emphasize the words and the story, old-style *corridos* were performed by individuals accompanied by a basic tune on their acoustic guitars, without embellishment, additional instrumentation, or complicated musical interludes. Today, *corridos* are performed by both individuals and groups and in almost all genres, from *mariachi* to *norteño*, and with all the instrumentation of such bands. Still, the emphasis remains on communicating the words clearly so that the listener can follow the story; thus, *corridos* are sung as a sequence of stanzas with the same melody.

Why should the *corrido* tradition continue?

Although mass media and scholars regularly document, analyze, and interpret important events, such documentations and interpretations are seldom from the perspective of the common folk, *el pueblo*. The *corrido* “*Viaje*,” included in Mexican musicologist Vicente Mendoza’s book (1954), summarizes the importance of the *corrido* tradition:

Nuestra música preciosa
Tenemos que propagar
Y nuestros víreles cantos
Por nuestra raza hablarán

Our precious music
We must spread
As our great songs
Will speak for our people

Instructions for [Composing a Corrido](#) and organizing a schoolwide [Corrido Writing Contest](#) follow. Let the *corrido* speak for the people!

Celestino Fernández is a Cultural Sociologist whose research and teaching interests include equity in education at all levels. He was a founding board member of a high school, serves on two other school boards, and has a charter high school named after him. Other specialty areas include Mexican music, particularly mariachi, norteños, and especially corridos. He has studied and led workshops on corridos and is preparing a CD of some of his compositions. He also focuses on happiness and created a course that enrolled 500 students each semester and lectured throughout the U.S. and abroad on this topic. He earned his MA and PhD in Sociology from Stanford University and is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona and a Consultant in several areas, including accreditation, happiness, corridos, and other genres of Mexican music.

Embedded URLs

El Corrido de Rosita Alvarez <https://youtu.be/98TPsiDjyM4> *Corrido Villista* <https://youtu.be/dcimmyOryLo>
Smithsonian Folkways <https://folkways.si.edu> *Obama corrido* <https://youtu.be/0fd-MVU4vtU>
La Carcel de Cananea <https://youtu.be/MLt4TvNBaxM> *Hilary Clinton corrido* <https://youtu.be/QCTwAz0GL60>
El Moro de Cumpas <https://youtu.be/YURfTjYEN1o> *Michael Jackson corrido* <https://youtu.be/ZSnJIm7iOKY>
El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez https://youtu.be/M9Jp4p8_fH8 *Twin Towers corrido* <https://youtu.be/LFXJjSpoaTY>
El Corrido de Joaquín Murrieta <https://youtu.be/t9dS3-FwF6k> *El Corrido del Caballo Blanco* <https://youtu.be/wxbF81eohDI>
Corrido de Nipsey <https://youtu.be/9xXHUFx5kmc> *El Corrido de Luis Donaldo Colosio*
Corrido del 24 <https://youtu.be/VvgJjY6xmt4> <https://youtu.be/IEVNv17Msh0>
Corridos tumbados <https://youtu.be/TOlx8t8ja2Y> *Corrido de Chihuahua* <https://youtu.be/n-XZoIIRSF4>

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