

***El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* by Mark C. Edberg. 2004. Austin: University of Texas Press. 212 pp., notes, references, appendices, photos, 2 figures. \$45.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback.**

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In recent years, the *narcocorrido*, a type of Mexican ballad usually performed by *conjunto norteño* groups, has become a popular subject of sociological inquiry. *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural-Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* by Mark Cameron Edberg, is one such study of this controversial musical genre. The book provides an extensive overview of drug traffickers as social actors in the context of Mexican border culture, the global music industry, and their socioeconomic and political contingencies. Edberg's work is based on the premise that music not only reflects, but also actively shapes social reality. As for the aim of his study, Edberg explains that it is to investigate the role of narcocorridos, "in combination with social conditions, in shaping the creation of a cultural archetype or persona—the narcotrafficker—and the pattern of action that ties violence, power, money, and drugs to political, social, and regional themes for which the narcotrafficker is known" (p.25).

The first chapter presents definitions of stratification and employs them as basis for a discussion of identity and representation in narcocorrido. In doing so, Edberg defines stratification as a figurative dialogue of social categorization in which status is constructed and contested around individual self-representations. Chapter two focuses on song lyrics, transcribed in their entirety in Spanish with English translations. The chapter includes a brief background on corridos, the parent genre of narcocorridos, and describes the situations in which the

latter are created and deployed. Edberg introduced the corrido through traditional songs about legendary bandits like Gregorio Cortez and Joaquin Murieta, as well as tequila bootleggers during Prohibition. This is followed by a discussion of contemporary ballads about smugglers and corrupt government officials involved in illegal drug trade.

Chapter three contains ethnographic data on Mexican border culture in general, and narcocorrido listeners in particular, which he gathered through interviews. Edberg also offers a detailed account of his personal experiences while working with people in poor neighborhoods of Ciudad Juárez and Los Angeles. Edberg also interviewed corrido bands, including one formed by inmates in the Ciudad Juárez central jail. An impression emerges of the drug dealer as being the community hero or "Robin Hood of the border"; an outlaw who defies threats posed by the streets and even the government, as he exploits the United States' demand for drugs in order to help Mexico's poor. Thus, Edberg characterizes the narcotrafficker as a manifestation of the "social bandit" archetype.

In chapter four, Edberg uses excerpts from an interview with a Long Beach-based family of producers and performers of narcocorridos, in order to explore changing gender roles within this musical tradition. According to this family, narcocorrido songs about women are becoming increasingly popular among both young men and women. Edberg closes by reminding readers of the extent to which "cultural images cross political boundaries via contemporary mass media and shape or are shaped by the market forces propelling the directionality of these images" (p.129).

Although the author draws on personal interviews and participant-observation of corrido listeners and musicians, one feels that he could have given more emphasis to informant testimonials. For instance, comments by a Long Beach-based family of narcocorrido producers and performers, the Rivera Family, are discussed in merely two pages of the text. As a result, the nature of the family's relationship with legendary narcocorrido singer Rosalino "Chalino" Sanchez, and their first-hand

experience of the world of narcocorridos and knowledge of the narcotrafficker “archetype” are not properly discussed.

Edberg’s research methodology is not disclosed within the narrative, but rather at the end of the book. While this organization is not typical of social scientific publications, it nevertheless preserved a smooth narrative flow. The appendices include sample questionnaires given to narcocorrido listeners, performers, and producers at concerts or community events. These help better to contextualize the informant quotations included in the text, and represent a useful reference for ethnomusicological studies. Similarly, by including numerous song lyrics with English translations, Edberg allows the narcocorrido genre and the culture from which it stems gradually to emerge. Therefore, the book would make for interesting reading, even without its theoretical musings.

Contrastingly, the ethnographic evidence surrounding the musical life of particular narcocorrido musicians like Rosalino “Chalino” Sanchez is less robust than the body of song lyrics. This is largely because Sanchez’s followers, and narcocorrido listeners in general, are residents of Los Angeles and surrounding areas in Southern California. However, the bulk of Edberg’s research was conducted in the cities of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. A more thorough analysis on the narcocorrido might give more attention to the socio-cultural particularities of Los Angeles-based conjunto norteño musical groups and their followers.

To be sure, Edberg does implicitly acknowledge the Rivera family’s instrumental role in the development of narcocorrido in both Mexico and the United States. However, their inclusion within the narrative appears exclusively in regard to the claim that women as performers and as subject matter of narcocorridos have recently gained prominence. The point could have rung all the more true, had Edberg clarified that members of the Rivera family spurred the narcocorrido scene, through their entrepreneurial activities and their support of the late Rosalino “Chalino” Sanchez. In this sense, *El Narcotrafficante* perhaps does not fully reach its objective to account for the “social conditions” and “pattern[s] of action”

that shape the narcocorrido scene. Nevertheless, it is well worth the time of readers interested in the development of Mexican and the social landscape of U.S.-Mexico border.