

Los Tigres' fame roars

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It's late afternoon on a sun-washed March Wednesday, and members of San Jose's most well-known Spanish band have entered a private airport to jet off to Las Vegas to be named BMI Icons, one of the highest honors in the record industry. Inside the airport, a buzz stirred among some Latino employees - members of the working class that make up the band's fan base: "Los Tigres del Norte," they whispered in Spanish, "has arrived."

"It's their words, their music - they know how to relate to us," said 36-year-old Carla Gonzalez, a fan since her father introduced her to the music as a youngster growing up in Mexico. The San Jose-based band that plays *norteño* music - a traditional style of Mexican folk that uses accordions mixed with acoustic bajo sexto, electric bass and drums - has sold more than 32 million albums and won numerous awards in a career that spans four decades.

But the latest honor, for their "influence on generations of music makers," is especially significant for band members, whose fame hadn't reached too far outside the Latino community - until now. An upsurge in the Mexican population in regions where the population was historically low is playing a key role in Los Tigres' growing fame, fueling attention by the mainstream media. It began around October, when the group's last album, "*Historias que Contar*," scored a Latin Grammy for best *norteño* album and went on to win a Grammy in the same category from the wider recording industry group.

National attention

Los Tigres then took to the road for an East Coast tour that attracted attention, including an article in the New York Times that called band founder Jorge Hernandez "mesmerizing." The Washington Post also chronicled a day in the life of the "grandfathers of *norteño*" as they took their storytelling songs, called *corridos*, to a crowded Charlotte, N.C., club where a Confederate flag hung. The whirlwind also led the men, whose songs mostly depict the real-life struggles of Latino immigrants, to the Sundance Film Festival to perform songs of theirs featured in the movie "*La Misma Luna*," starring America Ferrera of the TV series "Ugly Betty." Bay Area radio executives familiar with Los Tigres say their widening success is their destiny - the result of a discipline that's responsible for 39 original albums, 30 compilations and up to 150 concerts a year. "A lot of good things have happened to us without looking for it," said Jorge Hernandez, who started the band and chalks up their discipline to family ties. "We have a lot of love for what we do and for each other." The group's fame is particularly spreading in places like the East Coast and the South, where they sell out venues small and large. Take New York City, where Mexican descendants are now the fastest-growing ethnic group - tripling from 61,722 in 1990 to 186,872 in 2000, U.S. Census data shows. During the same period, North Carolina saw its Latino population increase from just under 78,000 in 1990 to nearly 379,000 in 2000. Mexican-Americans, including Mexican immigrants, now make up 65 percent of North Carolina's Latino population.

A long road

The attention has been a long time coming for the performers - four brothers and their cousin, most of whom came to this country in 1968 from Rosa Morada, a town in the Mexican state of Sinaloa - to earn money with their songs to support their parents after their father fell ill. The members - brothers Jorge, Eduardo, Hernan and Luis Hernandez and cousin Oscar Lara - are all humble men who have managed to maintain their status as the voice of Latino immigrants despite their stardom. In the 1960s, to provide for their family, Jorge got his brothers and cousin together to begin performing in bars, making enough money to help their parents. They learned to play instruments - accordions, bass, drums, guitars - honing their sound as they evolved. When others were going to Mexico City to launch their careers, the group chose to take a trip across the border to perform in a San Jose parade. Along the way, a Border Patrol officer gave them their name, calling them "*los tigres*" - "the tigers" - because of their youth. Their *corridos* tell stories of struggles, often taking on political issues that few others touch - including the border in their latest album, "*Detalles y Emociones*," released last week. In their song "*El Muro*," they challenge President Bush to erect a bridge rather than a wall between the United States and Mexico, urging him to look at immigrants, listen to their ideas.

'We tell the truth'

"We always try to put pictures in listeners' minds with each song," Jorge Hernandez said, adding that it touches their large working-class Latino fan base. "That's the best way to convey the message. We tell the truth." Alfredo Rodriguez remembers working for the defunct KEGL-AM (1430), the first San Jose radio station to play the group's music. Rodriguez is now the general manager for La Preciosa Network, which programs 21 Spanish radio stations across the country. "They have not changed," said Rodriguez, who toured with the group for a month in 1976. "They are still the same guys I met 35 years ago." Manuel Moran, production director for radio station KSJO-FM (92.3), has known the band members since his father worked for the Fama label when he was a boy. "Their albums are always about the topic of the year," said Moran. "Their songs mean so much to so many people because they really represent Latinos."

As other bands tried to evolve to fit the latest trend, "Los Tigres never did because we love our music and stay true to it," Jorge Hernandez said. "What's makes them different is they haven't forgotten where they come from," said Rodriguez, who has become a friend. "That's why people love them." Even now, as their pictures are splashed across the pages of some of the country's largest English-language publications, they haven't lost sight of their identity. They still get excited to see their names in the paper. They still offer strangers hugs. They still pose for pictures with fans. They still sign autographs into the early-morning hours after concerts. So where do the boys from Rosa Morada see themselves in a decade? "If the fans still want us, we'll be making music," Hernan Hernandez said.