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MUSIC REVIEW | 'LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE'

Singing Stories From Lives Lived Far Away From Home - By BEN RATLIFF



Photographs by Julien Jourdes for The New York Times

Los Tigres del Norte played and played on Saturday night in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

Los Tigres del Norte, together for almost 40 years, have perfected a ground-level symbiosis with their fans. They're in a constant feedback loop with their mostly Mexican audience above and below the border, whose stories of immigrant life — or poeticized versions of them, anyway — end up as songs. These stories are parables, but they're not told through oblique references; they're laid out on the table as straight rhyming narratives. The songs don't glorify the band, they glorify the audience.

Their show on Saturday night at the Bedford Armory in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, was mega-size: music all night and far into the morning hours, support acts as warm-ups and during an intermission, and Los Tigres playing 42 songs over two 90-minute segments that finally ended at 3 a.m. At this length — and with the impossible reverberations of sound that come from playing in a huge, open, concrete-floored space — the crowd doesn't just need to be entertained: it needs sustenance to keep going. And each time Los Tigres, in white spangled suits with tiger-striped instruments, bit into the groove of a two-beat ranchera, sustenance was served in jolts.

The music drifted into bolero and pop-ballad territory from time to time, but the meat of the show was the uptempo corridos, story-songs that became impossibly sad or righteously angry and above all, sympathetic: about scattered families (“Sr. Locutor”), a son murdered for a car (“Le Compre la Muerte a Mi Hijo”), an immigrant fed up with being condescended to who finally earns enough money to return to Mexico (“El Mojado Acaudalado”). They were nonjudgmental first-person stories, including the notorious narcocorrido “Pacas de a Kilo,” (“One-Kilo Packets”) told from the point of view of a proud marijuana grower. The heavily Mexican crowd knew the words, often singing along for a verse; just as often it turned away for the rest of a song, secure in the knowledge that a new one would start up within three and a half minutes.

But sustenance also came through the crush of bodies and couples dancing in a clinch, through the marketplace atmosphere of taco stands and circulating flower vendors, through the ritual of the fans throwing messages to the band — read back in rapid-fire by the band’s singer and accordionist Jorge Hernández — and through screens at the side of the stage that bore text messages from the crowd: “Saludos a Matamoros Puebla.” “Monterrey in tha house.” “Kika te amo.”

Brothers or cousins except for its drummer, Oscar Lara, the band originally comes from Sinaloa, Mexico, but has lived in San Jose, Calif., for nearly 40 years. Its setup is the norteño music standard: two accordions, six-string acoustic bajo sexto, electric bass and drums. All the front line members sing, but Mr. Hernández is the most charismatic.

Singing with a headset microphone and adding stabs of accordion chords, he kept working through his battery of gestures of respect or supplication or triumph: doffing his cowboy hat and holding it out with arm fully extended, then putting it back in place, raising his fingers to his lips or his heart, putting forth a fist and shaking it once to signify firmness. He moved entirely in slow motion as the beat pumped behind him, and he was mesmerizing.

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