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Fierce Enough to Bite

Still Playing Hard After 40 Years, Los Tigres Stay True To Their Immigrant Roots

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CHARLOTTE They're sitting around the table last Sunday for a little pre-show dinner, this band of brothers, Mexican-born, California-bred, the most famous creators of the brassy, accordion-heavy norteño sound.

A cellphone rings with news from Los Angeles.

¿Ganamos? ("We won?") Pause. ¡Ganamos! Yes, they *just* won -- the second Grammy in Los Tigres del Norte's 40-year career. En masse, they stand up, forming a bit of a conga line, shaking hands, slapping backs and kissing cheeks, every one of them, the bass player, the tour manager, the accordion player . . .

After the show, fans will stick around till the clock pushes past 3, clamoring for pictures, stealing kisses, exhorting them: ¡Defiendan nuestros derechos! (Stick up for our rights!)

As the lyrical voice of the Latino immigrant, they've been sticking up for the rights of el pueblo ever since they recorded their first corrido, or ballad, in the late '60s. But the pre-dawn hours will bring something to remind them what it is to be brown-skinned and accented in America, never mind the private jet, the tricked-out tour bus, the 32 million recordings sold. To remind them of why, after four decades of making music, Los Tigres have decided to become even more vocal about their political convictions.



From Left: Oscar Lara, road manager Hector Arambula, bassist Hernán Hernández and brother Eduardo, who plays the saxophone, accordion and guitar, are notified about their Grammy Award win before a show in Charlotte.

They are sitting in the hotel lobby here, they later say, basking in that Grammy afterglow, waiting for the restaurant to open for breakfast. Gone are the saffron beaded costumes, the accordions and the guitars. Now, they're in sportcoats and dress slacks, middle-aged men. Until hotel management approaches. Demands to see their hotel keys. Demands to see identification.

Heavy sigh.

They tell this story with a knowing shrug and a roll of the eyes.

Since appearing at La Marcha, the immigration-rights marches held in cities across the United States last April, Los Tigres del Norte, who play the D.C. Armory tonight, have taken a tougher, even more critical line.

On their CD to be released next month, "Detalles y Emociones," they sing about President Bush's plans to build a barrier along the Mexico-U.S. border. On the track "El Muro" (The Wall), they sing -- in Spanish, English, Farsi, French and German: "Bush, Bush, don't push. . . . better to build a bridge than a wall. . . . Listen Mr. President, you know you need us, on your team as well as in the kitchen. . . ."

And these days, the godfathers of norteño are gaining mainstream attention: There is this month's Best Norteño Album win for "Historias Que Contar" ("Stories to Tell") -- their first Grammy in 20 years. Then at next month's 14th Annual Latin Awards ceremony, they'll receive a BMI Icons award for their "unique and indelible influence on generations of music makers."

All this while playing more than 150 concerts a year, from Los Angeles to Mexico City, from Bogota to Boston, from Japan to Jalisco.

And they're set to figure prominently in two feature films this year. They'll make their mainstream movie debut in "La Misma Luna" (starring "Ugly Betty's" America Ferrera), about a Mexican boy who crosses the border to join his mother in the States. And their music will serve as the soundtrack for "Bordertown," which stars Jennifer Lopez as a reporter investigating the murders of the hundreds of women in Juarez. (Los Tigres was among the first musical acts to speak out about the killings, in their 2003 song "Las Mujeres de Juarez" ("Women of Juarez")).

"All these problems we have [as immigrants], we make into songs," says the band's leader, Jorge Hernández, 54, alternating between English and Spanish. "All the information we get, we try to publicize, talk about historical stuff. . . . People use our songs politically."

Indeed, during their current tour, in those after-show meet-and-greets, fans confide in them their troubles, how they're living here but would rather be *there*, how their U.S.-born children are turning into something that they don't recognize. Often, those stories end up in their songs.

"More than any other artist, they touch on themes that are the immigrant's experience . . . crossing the border, being here, having a culture clash," says Leila Cobo, executive director of Latin Contents and Programming for Billboard.

"Of course, Los Tigres are a success story. But they talk to people that are in the middle of the struggle, and haven't arrived yet."

For Los Tigres del Norte (literally, the Tigers of the North), music is advocacy.

"People don't just go [to our concerts] to party," says Los Tigres bassist Hernán Hernández, 50. "They go for a purpose."

Los Tigres -- Jorge, Eduardo, Hernán, Luís and Oscar -- are 21st-century troubadours, taking old-school Mexican corridos, storytelling ballads, and marrying them to a bouncy norteño beat, rich with oompah-oompahing accordions, showy saxophones and comedic sound effects. They are at once silly and serious, scrappy and sentimental, detailing the bittersweetness of life in El Norte, where if you're lucky, you can partake of the American dream, but -- as they bemoan in "La Jaula del Oro" ("The Gilded Cage") -- something gets lost in the transition.

Mis hijos no hablan conmigo . . . ,

piensan como americanos,

niegan que son MEXICANO

aunque tengan mi color,

My children don't talk to me . . .

they think like Americans

They deny that they're MEXICAN,

even though they're the same color as me

Those lyrics resonate for Los Tigres. They have lived that experience, ever since four Hernández brothers, along with cousin Oscar Lara, the band's drummer, slipped across the border back in '68 to seek a musical living. They headed for San Jose, Calif., leaving behind their folks and life in Sinaloa, Mexico.

They were very young -- the oldest was 14 -- and very poor. Between gigs, they'd work odd jobs, landscaping, whatever it took.

They've grown to become a massive brand. They've released 55 albums, made 14 films in Mexico and filled concert halls and arenas across the United States and Latin America.

They are beloved in Mexico, where they regularly tour. In 1987, they won their first Grammy for Best Mexican-American Performance for their album, "Gracias America . . . Sin Fronteras" and have won five Latin Grammys. Along the way, they married, had children, created lives, became American citizens. One brother, Raúl, went solo. Another, Freddy, the percussionist, died in his sleep of a heart ailment at 23 in 1993.

It can be a high-profile existence.



Baby brother Luís, 32, a onetime soccer scholarship student at Stanford who joined the band 10 years ago, says, "Being in this band, you're not allowed to make mistakes."

But Los Tigres have become adept at navigating fault lines, balancing concerns about their personal privacy with a desire to be accessible to their fans; juggling their activist passions with business concerns; to remain relevant to younger audiences while staying true to their musical roots; to enjoy American citizenship while maintaining their Mexicanidad, or "Mexican-ness," and above all, keeping things tight at home while touring 10 months a year.

A few years back, when Jorge became an American citizen at the urging of his two children who were born in the States, he found it was something he didn't like to trumpet.

"I have two patrias," he says, though a part of him feels as though he betrayed Mexico by becoming a U.S. citizen.

"But when you're born in another country, you have to let it go."

* * *

No me llamen traicionero

Que a mis dos patrias las quiero . . .

Don't call me a traitor

because I love my two countries . . .

-- "*Mis Dos Patrias*" ("*My Two Countries*")

Onstage at Coyote Joe's, a cavernous cowboy joint here, the Confederate flag hangs, unnoticed and uncommented upon, as Jorge sings about how America is a country, not a color, crooning as the band kicks up a happily rollicking rhythm that belies the anger of the lyrics.

As venues go, this is one of the smaller ones Los Tigres plays, with a capacity of 3,000. The night before, in Atlanta, there were more than 8,000. Tonight, as is the case with all their shows, the crowd is mostly Latino. Many are new immigrants. There are middle-aged couples snuggling in corners; tweens in bright T's dashing around. But mostly, the club is jammed with young adults, bright-eyed girls in bootylicious denim, arms draped around baby-faced boys in cowboy hats. They dance ranchera style (a sort of two-step), bouncing to the beat.



Teo, a 46-year-old construction worker with a cowboy hat and a weather-beaten face, stands on the sideline. He and his wife, Ana, 42, just arrived two months ago from Mexico, and no, they don't have papers. But as long as you don't "drive drunk," Teo says, you don't have to worry here. He hopes.

He loves Los Tigres, loves their music, the emotion of it all.

"Hearing the music in Spanish," he says, "you can feel the emotion. Their music is coinciding with my own experiences."

"There's a lot of love in their songs," says Alejandro, 18, a small, wiry-looking man who moved here from Hidalgo.

A handful of teenagers stumble around, the plastic rings of a six-pack wrapped around their wrists like white bracelets. Here, a six-pack of Corona sells for \$36.

Watching the teens is Angeles Ortega-Moore, the executive director of the Charlotte-based Latin American Coalition, and she frets. Thanks to a new program started last April, sheriff's deputies routinely screen prisoners for their immigration status. Since last April, close to 1,000 prisoners have been processed for deportation, according to Ortega-Moore.

Charlotte's had its tensions.

According to Ortega-Moore, the city's seen a 614 percent increase in its Latino population since the 1990 Census. In the United States, about 65 percent of the Latino population is American-born, according to the census. Charlotte is almost the reverse: close to 70 percent of Latinos are foreign-born, most of them Mexican. The growth in the city's Latino population has fueled growth in KKK membership, according to the Charlotte Observer.

" 'Illegal immigration' has become synonymous with Latinos," Ortega-Moore says.

When Ortega-Moore first started working at the Latin American Coalition six years ago, it was a one-room office. It now has a staff of 11 and services roughly 1,000 immigrants a month, counseling them on everything from housing to labor issues to immigration information to starting a business to buying a house.

"The people who come here are already risk-takers," Ortega-Moore says. "They leave behind family and language, culture and food."

Los Tigres' kind of people.

* * *

In 1972, Los Tigres had their first breakout hit with "Contrabando y Traicion" ("Contraband and Betrayal"), based on the real-life story of Camelia La Tejana and Emilio Varela, a Bonnie-and-Clyde duo who crossed the border with a stash of pot in the tires of their car.

"Contrabando y Traicion" secured their future, as Los Tigres made a name for themselves by telling it like it was, singing narcocorridos about folks living on the other side of the law. To this day, Jorge bristles at the idea that they were glorifying criminals. They refuse to be photographed with weapons, and unlike other singers of narcocorridos such as Chalino Sanchez, who was gunned down gangland style, insist on cultivating a clean-cut image.

"I was upset when they associated me with it," he says. "We told true stories. We are only carriers of the truth."

In time, their truth-telling focused more on immigration issues, songs of longing and loss, of accomplishments and frustrations. Fans contact them at their San Jose offices, pouring out the stories of their lives in handwritten letters and tapes, stories that the songwriters who work with Los Tigres take and incorporate into the music. Last year's single, "Señor Locutor" ("Mr. Dee-Jay"), tells of a real-life phenomenon -- the way Spanish language DJs help estranged family members reunite.

"We really listen to what they have to say," Hernán says. "People are all the time looking at us. We have to think ahead. We feel more responsible now than ever. Music changes. But we're still singing about problems, immigration . . . "

* * *

1:30 a.m.

It's freezing outside. Backstage, in a small unheated room, Los Tigres, soaked in sweat after their concert, are shivering a bit. But for now, the warmth of the tour bus must be postponed -- there are fans lined up outside, waiting to meet Los Tigres. Atenio Hernandez, a brother who is not in the band, holds a handful of cash. A photographer stands at the ready, Polaroid camera in hand. A fan hands Atenio a bill, and dashes to the front of the room, shaking hands and kissing the cheeks of Los Tigres before wrapping an arm around a favorite Tigre.

"A la foto!" the photographer commands.

Fixed smiles all around.

Click.

The ritual is repeated again and again, with Atenio collecting the fees for the Polaroid photos (\$5).

The band used to pose for free, Jorge says, but when the pictures ended up selling on the Internet, they started charging a fee. (Fans who bring their own cameras pose for free.)

Lisette Aurelio, a pouty 19-year-old who's originally from Texas, waits. "They still look good," she says. "And they're representing for Mexico."

When it's her turn, she makes a dash for Hernán, wrapping her arms around his neck, trying to force him into an impromptu French kiss. He pulls away, looking a little embarrassed -- and yes, a little pleased, too.

For most, posing with Los Tigres is a solemn thing. A tall, bronze-skinned man poses with them, bending their ears as he describes his odyssey from Mexico to Charlotte.

Enough, they finally say.

Okay, okay, he says. But as he leaves, he shouts over his shoulder:

¡Defiendan nuestros derechos!

Stick up for our rights!

For more information on Los Tigres Del Norte, please contact John Reilly at 212.445.8440 / jreilly@rogersandcowan.com
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