Notes on the *Corrido* “Danger in the Desert”

**The Corrido**

The *corrido* is a musical-poetic form that has been part of the Mexican cultural tradition for generations. It has been a popular means of documenting and commenting on issues and events of importance to “el pueblo” (the people; working class). Topics and themes include, among many others: folk heroes, the Mexican Revolution, immigration, assassinations (for example, John F. Kennedy and Donaldo Colosio), towns and regions, miraculous events, shocking events such as earthquakes and the destruction of the twin towers in New York City. Basically, any topic can inspire a *corrido* and *corridos* often serve as the editorial page of “el pueblo” (the people) – commenting on a topic or issue and providing a perspective, the perspective of the common people.

The *corrido* “Danger in the Desert” deals with the theme of how dangerous it is to cross the U.S.-Mexico border through the Arizona desert, particularly during the summer months. With the change in U.S. Border Patrol policy and the implementation of “Operation Gatekeeper” in 1994, the average number of migrant deaths (recovered bodies) increased dramatically from less than 20 to over 200 annually. This has been a radical change that has had serious consequences. As the words of the ballad note, thousands of men, women and children have died in the Arizona desert. Also, the Pima County Medical Examiner has not been able to identify many of the recovered bodies and, thus, their families cannot even be notified.

The goal of this *corrido* is simply to inform potential immigrants of the danger of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border through the desert. Most of the time, the “coyotes” (people smugglers) lie to the immigrants telling them that they can walk from Sasabe (a very small community and highly popular crossing point on the border, located west of Nogales) to Tucson in one day and with one gallon of water when in reality it takes several days and many gallons of water.

In the *corrido* tradition, when death has been described in the story, the last or penultimate verse usually begins with “Fly, fly little dove.” In recognition of the thousands of immigrants that have already died, “Danger in the Desert” includes two verses that begin with this common wording.

The ballad “Danger in the Desert” was inspired by two fountains: 1) the knowledge and first-hand experience of Dr. Fernández regarding Mexican immigration and the *corrido* tradition that has been historically used to document important events by and for the working classes; and 2) a research project of Dr. Samuel Keim, Dr. and Prof. of emergency medicine at the University of Arizona’s hospital whose research focuses on the deaths of migrants in the Arizona desert. This
research project documents the probability of migrants dying based on the day’s temperature, thus, as the temperature rises, so does the probability of migrants dying due to heat conditions, particularly dehydration.

The Composer

The composer of the lyrics of the corrido “Danger in the Desert” is Dr. Celestino Fernández, who is originally from Santa Ines, Michoacán, Mexico, and is currently a professor of sociology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. His research interests include, among other topics, Mexican migration and the Mexican musical-poetic tradition known as the corrido. Throughout his life, he has experienced immigration firsthand. His father was a “bracero” (a contracted agricultural worker) during the 1940s and later an undocumented immigrant. When he acquired his legal immigration documents, while living in Santa Rosa, California, he returned to Michoacán for the family. Dr. Fernández was between eight and nine years old at the time. Afterwards the family returned to visit family in Michoacán on a regular basis, as they continue to do to the present.

Prof. Fernández obtained his M.A. (1974) and doctorate (1976) at the prestigious Stanford University. He then began his long professional career as a professor at the University of Arizona where during fifteen years he also served as a vice president. Currently, Dr. Fernández continues teaching and conducting research. He has published more than 45 academic articles in books and journals; he also has composed over 25 corridos, including one for the movie, “Rita From the Sky.”

The Singer

The music and voice of the corrido “Danger in the Desert” are those of Mr. Guillermo Sáenz, who is originally from the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, and currently resides in Glendale, Arizona. He is a professional musician and teacher, and a graduate of the University of Arizona. Dr. Fernández and Mr. Sáenz have collaborated on several corrido projects over the years, such as recordings, presentations at conferences, workshops and contests.