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Los Tigres del Norte**Renowned musicians sing truth to power**

MARK KEMP - Special to the Observer

Like American music icons from Woody Guthrie to George Jones, Los Tigres del Norte (The Tigers of the North) have been singing about both criminals and everyday working people for more than 35 years.

But the characters who populate Los Tigres' songs aren't dust bowl refugees or liquor runners -- they're modern-day drug smugglers who clash with the law, and hard-working Mexican laborers who risk everything to bring families across the border for better opportunities.

In a recent phone interview, lead singer and accordionist Jorge Hernández said he considers Los Tigres musical journalists -- much like '60s protest singer Phil Ochs or '90s rappers Public Enemy -- who document the struggles of real people.

"We sing about things that happen in life," said Hernández, whose band performs on Sunday night at Coyote Joe's. "We make songs that talk about history, talk about problems, talk about violent people."

Los Tigres, who sell out arenas and stadiums around the world like English-language superstars such as the Rolling Stones or U2, play the regional Mexican musical style *norteño*, known for its jaunty accordion lines and dancing polka beat.

But the group's popularity extends well beyond its particular genre. When Los Tigres prowl into any metropolitan area, from Madrid to Mexico City, young fans press up against the stage and sing along to every word.

Meanwhile, their parents and grandparents dance together in the background, perhaps reflecting on the first time they heard such early hits as "Contrabanda y Traición," Los Tigres' breakthrough *corrido* (ballad) of 1972, about a couple of Bonnie & Clyde-like drug smugglers.

"When I sing songs to the people, I want them to know exactly what happened, to understand what I'm saying," said Hernández. "I want them to believe what I'm talking about, because it's true."

One topic that's long been important to the band members -- four brothers and a cousin who crossed the border in 1968 -- is the issue of immigration. Los Tigres' forthcoming album, which hasn't yet been named, includes one particularly powerful song called "*El Muro*," or "The Wall."

"We think this is one of the strongest songs that I ever made," said Hernández. "We recorded it in two different sections and I speak four languages in it -- German, French, English and Farsi -- because those are the languages of countries that have built walls to keep people out. I think people are going to have strong reaction to it."

PREVIEW**Los Tigres del Norte**

Its "Historias Que Contar" will be up for Best Norteño Album at Sunday's Grammy Awards ceremony.

WHEN: Doors open at 8 p.m. Sunday, but there are a couple of other acts opening.

WHERE: Coyote Joe's, 4621 Wilkinson Blvd.

TICKETS: \$50-\$60. There is no presale; all tickets must be purchased at the door. **DETAILS:** 770-437-8911.

Musical Journalism

Five popular Los Tigres songs that speak truth to Latino immigrants and give a snapshot of the band's career, which spans some 55 albums, more than 32 million copies sold worldwide and multiple Grammy awards and nominations:

- 1. "La Jaula de Oro" ("The Golden Cage"):** This poignant song expresses the feelings of many first-generation undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. who don't speak English. The refrain (sung in Spanish): "What good is money if I'm like a prisoner inside this big nation?"
- 2. "Somos Mas Americanos" ("We're More American"):** Its unforgettable line, "Yo no cruce la frontera, la frontera me cruzo" ("I didn't cross the border, the border crossed me"), has been adopted by pro-immigration groups as a political slogan.
- 3. "Tres Veces Mojado" ("Three Times a Wetback"):** From the 1989 movie of the same name (which starred members of Los Tigres), this song tells of the struggles of a Salvadoran refugee who risks his life crossing three borders -- into Guatemala, then Mexico, and finally the United States -- in search of a better life.
- 4. "José Pérez León":** This haunting corrido recounts the tale of a man who suffocates inside the trunk of a car as he attempts to cross the border. It was inspired by the deaths of 16 immigrants who suffocated inside a truck in Texas in October 2003.
- 5. "Las Mujeres de Juárez" ("The Women of Juárez"):** This highly charged protest song takes the Mexican government and police to task for its corruption and inaction in the brutal unsolved murders since 1993 of more than 300 women in the border city of Juárez. -- *Mark Kemp*

You Might Be a Los Tigres Fan If ...

- You get upset when the light turns green and the truck blasting regional Mexican music drives away, taking away the song you've begun tapping your feet to;• You like the politically charged music of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Springsteen, Billy Bragg, Public Enemy or U2;
- You have found yourself opening up and enjoying the contemporary pop music of superstars like Juanes, Shakira and Julieta Venegas, regardless of the language difference;
- You have the stamina to dance off five or so pounds at concerts that tend to last for more than three hours (Dead, Phish or Bruce Springsteen fans -- this means you);
- You want to forge a bond between yourself and your Latino neighbors. -- *Mark Kemp*

Want to Get on the Guest List?

Los Tigres del Norte will admit two lucky readers into the concert for free (and each one can bring a guest -- also for free)! E-mail wintickets@charlotteobserver.com with your name, a daytime phone number and **no more 25 words explaining why we should pick YOU**. Winners will be drawn at 3 p.m. today.