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Some things can only be said in a tragic Mexican corrido — and here's your chance

By David Montgomery August 24   Follow @dmc



Juan Días is a corrido workshop leader and co-founder of the Sones de Mexico Ensemble. (Courtesy of Sones de Mexico Ensemble)

*Come gather 'round me people,
a story I will tell....*

Whoops, if this were a Mexican corrido, we might have begun that way (except in Spanish). Since it's a blog post about the first-ever Library of Congress Mexican corrido song-writing workshop, let's get to the facts.

The library's [American Folklife Center](#) just put out the [call for participants](#) to join this unusual creative endeavor on Sept. 15. The first 20 or so who register by Sept. 1 will be admitted to the free workshop. Corrido expert and performer Juan Días, a founder of the Chicago-based band [Sones de Mexico Ensemble](#), will guide the process. [Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera](#) will participate in the workshop.

Over the course of 2½ hours, the workshop students will pick a subject and write the lyrics, which Días will set to a traditional tune. A specialist from the U.S. Copyright Office will help copyright the group effort. That night, Herrera will read the corrido at a poetry presentation. The next day, the corrido will be performed twice by Sones de Mexico — once at the Library of Congress and once at the Kennedy Center, on the Millennium Stage.

Registration information is [here](#). One requirement is that you have to be comfortable speaking and writing in Spanish. But everyone is welcome at a one-hour lecture on corridos that Días will give in English before the workshop.

What's a corrido anyway? It's a ballad form that dates to the 19th century but is as vital today as ever. New corridos are being written by such superstars as [Los Tigres del Norte](#). Countless bands also specialize in the notorious sub-genre, the narco-corrido, devoted to the exploits of drug kings.

At its essence, the corrido has always been a way to spread the news of tragic heroes — good-hearted outlaws, rebels and revolutionaries.

“Corridos have this appeal that they tell stories,” usually based on fact, Días says. “Typically, the person will die at the end of the song. But in the process of getting to their doom, they're going to display some honorable, defiant act of valor.”



Sones de Mexico Ensemble performs a concert at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater. (Elizabeth Fraiberg)

The rules of composition can be strict. Díes favors lines of eight syllables. A corrido generally opens with an invitation to the listener, followed by a narrative of deeds and tragic flaws, and then a concluding message, moral or farewell to the listener.

“It’s the musical equivalent of a monument or a statue to someone you admire,” Díes says. “You want them to live a long time, and for the corrido to be kept in the oral tradition for a long time, so that this person will never be forgotten.”

Díes started listening to corridos and playing guitar as a boy in Mexico before moving to the United States in 1982, when he was 18. Sones de Mexico received a grant of \$35,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts to offer corrido workshops across the country.

The American Folklife Center has a rare collection of corridos, including some recorded in the 1930s in Texas by pioneering musicologist John A. Lomax Sr.

[*\[Listen to an example of a classic corrido performed by Sones de Mexico Ensemble\]*](#)

The workshop will continue the tradition, says Jennifer Cutting, a folklife specialist at the American Folklife Center.

“Tradition is a chain with links that extend into the past, and we keep building links,” Cutting says. “This corrido will go on to be sung by others into the future.”



David Montgomery writes general features, profiles and arts stories for the Sunday Magazine and Style, including pieces on the Latino community and Latino arts.
