

I took a taxi to Fontes's house. The watchman said he was out. Standing there, I realized that Artemio Fontes certainly wouldn't want drugs legalized if in fact their value, bloated by virtue of being forbidden, had afforded him this agglomeration of carved wooden doors and shiny white brick, surrounded by rosebushes and iron bars.

ON MY LAST DAY in the Sierra, I accompanied Edwin Bustillos to his home village, Guachochi, where he broadcasts a weekly radio show in four dialects to educate Indians about their rights and their priceless environment, encouraging them to unite against unscrupulous lumber caciques and narcotraficantes. He was pleased, he told me, because he had obtained from witnesses the license number of the truck whose occupants had fired at his house, which he was passing along to Teresa Jardí.

We walked outside. The truck with offending license plate, from the state of Sinaloa, was parked next to his car.

"We better get out of here," Bustillos sighed.

Two Songs about Drug Smuggling

Salomé Gutiérrez and Paulino Vargas

A number of factors have operated to convert smugglers into Mexican and borderlands heroes. The illegality of such enterprises has meant fabulous profits for people willing to take big risks. The lure of wealth and danger is widely celebrated in the macho culture of Mexico and the border. Add to that a measure of nationalistic resentment of the United States and its border patrols, the practice of modest philanthropy on the part of successful smugglers, and a long tradition of venerating bandits and rebels—many of whom struck a blow against the corrupt and violent Mexican police and their counterparts, "los Rinches" (the heavy-handed Anglo-Texan, New Mexican, and Arizona Rangers)—and you have the makings of a "contrabandista" culture. Smuggling even has its own "holy city," Culiacán, Sinaloa, whose souvenir shops sell items glorifying smugglers and drug lords as romantic outlaws, and its own patron saint, Jesús Malverde, a bandit who, according to lore, stole from the rich and gave to the poor, and was hanged in 1909. Ordinary folks come to pay homage at his shrine in Culiacán, while drug smugglers offer him thanks for successful shipments.

Below we translate a pair of songs that deal with the topic of drug smuggling on the border. The first, "El Gato Negro," was written by Salomé Gutiérrez and made famous by San Antonio-based Rubén Ramos and his band, the Texas Revolution. The second, "La Banda del Carro Rojo," was composed by Paulino Vargas and performed most famously by the duo Los Alegres de Terán.

EL GATO NEGRO

They call me the Black Cat,
all the lawmen are searching for me.
They say I'm dangerous,
a soul-less criminal.

Since I was very young
I've devoted myself to vices,
I know every kind of evil.

I know all the traffickers and criminals
of the region.

From the mountains of Chihuahua,
with a white cargo I would travel.
I would cross through the customs stations
right between the sheriffs' whiskers.

With whole cargoes of pot
I would go to Chicago and New York.
Several times, my luck ran out and
I landed in prison.

Over in Laredo the sheriffs set up
an ambush; I split for Alice,
shooting northward,
I didn't even fear death.

I passed through San Antonio by night
arriving at Houston, I don't know why.
The patrolmen had been advised
and I just escaped capture.

Terrible jail at Kansas City,
Famous jail of San Quentin.
From the new jail in San Antonio
I left from the fifth floor.

The Black Cat doesn't say good-bye,
he just disappears.
When you see me all in black,
with dark eyes, you'll know that's me.

THE RED CAR GANG

They say they came from the south
in a red car;
they were carrying 100 kilos of cocaine,
they were on their way to Chicago.
So said the informer
who had turned them in.

They'd already passed through customs,
the one at El Paso.
But in Las Cruces the cops
were waiting for them.
They were the Texas Rangers
who ran that county.

A siren wailed and the sergeant shouted
that they must stop the car
so it could be registered,
and not to resist
because if they did they'd be killed.

An M-16 roared
as it opened fire,
and the light from a patrol-car
circled through the air.
So began the battle
where the great massacre took place.

Lino Quintana told them:
"This had to happen.
My companions are dead,
now they won't be able to talk;
and I'm sorry, sheriffs,
I don't know how to sing."

Only the crosses remained
of the seven who died;
four were from the red car,
the other three from the government.
Don't worry about them,
they'll all go to hell with Lino.

Some say they came from Cantón,
others say they were from Altar,
a few even say they were from Parral.
The truth was never known,
for no one came to claim them.

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