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UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Jenni Rivera: An Appreciation

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If you didn't know who Jenni Rivera was before December 9, 2012, by now you've surely heard of the Diva of Banda. You know that in addition to being a singer she was a successful actress who was about to cross over into the living rooms of non-Latino, English-speaking America with a reality TV show on ABC. You also know about her beauty and clothing lines, political activism, and charitable work. You've probably also heard that her father, Pedro, ran what *The New York Times* referred to as a “small, independent record label” that fans of banda and norteña know **Cintas Acuario**, which launched the narcocorrido genre and produced Chalino Sanchez, the epically huge star whose tragic death – in circumstances much different from Ms. Rivera's – has become the stuff of legend.

You know all this, but people aren't talking so much about Rivera's significance for the study of music and Chicano culture. Rivera's “Las Malandrinas” scandalized *mexicanos* with its portrayal of unapologetic women who like to have a good time, and *mujeres* everywhere were empowered by her argument, in “Ovarios,” for the use of “ovaries” as a symbol for guts and courage akin to “balls.” But Rivera's musical work deserves more than passing appreciation, since she posed a significant challenge to dominant, patriarchal narratives about the place of *banda* and *corridos* in contemporary Chicano studies.

Chicano Studies first emerged around the study of *corridos*, the ballads Rivera sings about in “Las Malandrinas,” in Americo Paredes's classic work “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958). Paredes detailed the history of the emergence of the corrido along the Texas-Mexico border raised a resolutely Chicano cultural form to academic prominence in the United States and introduced a vast body of oral lore into the study of American literature in this country. But his book also turned the *corrido* into an historical object, arguing that *corrido* production was on the wane by the 1930s.

Indeed, until 1992, young Chicanos tended to view *corridos*, *norteña*, and *banda* as music for their parents and grandparents' generations. But on January 20 of that year, Chalino Sánchez, a young singer from Sinaloa, was shot while performing in Coachella, just outside of Palm Springs, California. Sánchez – who pulled out his own pistol and returned fire – sang gritty, powerful songs, produced by Ms. Rivera's family's label, about *narcotraficantes* and their world of crime. Sánchez's shooting garnered him many new listeners as young audiences began to associate *corridos* now not with older generations but with a gangster culture similar to that portrayed in rap and hip-hop.

Sanchez and his musical descendants call to question the ways in which Chicano Studies takes up the *corrido*, but Jenni Rivera turns even that revolution upside down. Paredes observed that men perform *corridos*, and scholars in his mold have taken that historical observation as a given, lauding singers like Lydia Mendoza or Eva Ybarra as remarkable exceptions. As Deb Vargas has shown recently in *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (2012), *mexicanas* have a long history of dissident musical performance against the “heteromasculinist” logic of Mexican culture. Jenni Rivera deserves a place in that history. Her unfortunate and untimely death might just catalyze the serious academic attention her body of work merits, but we have lost an important voice.

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