

LOCAL HEROES

Los Tigres del Norte performs at the Billboard Mexican Music Awards in 2013.



Los Tigres Are Troubadours of Truth

For its followers, norteno band is as much social force as musical legend **By Agustin Gurza**

THEY HAVE BEEN a band for as long as the Rolling Stones. They've recorded more than 500 songs and made more than 60 albums, selling over 35 million copies worldwide. They've appeared in some 18 movies and won 10 Grammy and Latin Grammy Awards.

But when Mexican norteno band Los Tigres del Norte get their star Aug. 21 on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, most people still might wonder, "the who?" Despite the crossover success of other Latino performers who share stars on the celebrity walkway, from Ricardo Montalban to Ricky Martin, Los Tigres remain the most famous band you probably never heard of.

However, to their legions of fans, many of whom share the same immigrant roots, Los Tigres are more than just celebrities. They are working-class heroes, champions of the undocumented who for four decades have sung about their dreams and disappointments, discrimination and drive for rights and respect.

"This is another accomplishment that

we owe to the community, to our fans who have stayed so loyal so long," says bassist Hernan Hernandez.

That populist touch is perhaps the single most important factor in the band's longevity. Los Tigres are storytellers, like the traveling troubadours of old.

"They are more than a band," said border culture expert Juan Carlos Ramirez-Pimienta of San Diego State U. In a recent, front-page feature story in the New York Times, "They are social leaders as well, who steer the course of the conversation among Mexican-Americans and the Latino community."

Los Tigres are literally a band of brothers — Jorge, Hernan, Eduardo and Luis Hernandez, plus their cousin, Oscar Lara. They have been playing together since they were boys growing up in a rural hamlet in Sinaloa. In the 1960s, nobody in their rancho even had a radio. So they had to learn songs the old-fashioned way, by word of mouth.

Tragedy turned them from amateurs to professionals. When their father was disabled in a job accident, the boys decided to raise money for his care by taking their act on the road. From city to city, they passed the hat for a dollar a song, always wiring money home for the family.

Their big break came when they were offered the chance to play at Salinas Valley State Prison in Soledad, Calif., part of a show for Spanish-speaking inmates. Jorge, the eldest, was just 16. When an immigration official asked for the band's name, the kids confessed they didn't have one. So the border agent made one up for them on the spot, the Little Tigers, slang for young go-getters. During that trip, their passports were stolen and they got stranded in San Jose, where they've been based since 1968.

For almost half a century, Los Tigres have hewn closely to the traditional norteno genre, a rural, roots-music style popular in northern Mexico where it incorporated the polka and the accordion from German immigrants. They are best known for their corridos, or narrative ballads about famous revolutionaries and everyday heroes. They were among the early exponents of modern-day narco-corridos, with seminal, drug-smuggling songs such as "Contrabando y Traicion" (1971) and "La Banda del Carro Rojo" (1973).

Their career has notched a series of firsts: the first band to win a Grammy for regional Mexican music in (1987); the first of its genre to record in the MTV Unplugged series. And now, Los Tigres are the first in their genre to get a star on the Walk of Fame.

"This honor has a great significance, not only for Los Tigres but for this music in general," Jorge Hernandez says. "And we wish with all our hearts that our music be finally accepted at a national and international level, which is a goal we have always strived for."

Notable Firsts

Their career has notched a series of firsts.

- The first band to win a Grammy for regional Mexican music (1987)
- The first of its genre to record in the MTV Unplugged series
- The first community-based group, through its foundation, to make a sizable donation to UCLA — \$500,000 to the Chicano Studies Research Center for historic projects
- Will be the first in its genre to get a star on the Walk of Fame

Tipsheet

WHAT
Los Tigres del Norte receives a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.
WHEN
11:30 a.m., Aug. 21
WHERE
7060 Hollywood Blvd.