



Smithsonian Center For Education And Museum Studies

**Learning about History through Corridos**  
***Lesson 1: Telling our own stories through Corridos***

**Targeted Grade Level: 6-12**

**National History Standards Objectives**

- ❖ Investigating family history.
- ❖ Drawing conclusions from different sources of data (e.g., interviews, artifacts, songs)
- ❖ Explaining the ways families have transmitted beliefs and values through oral traditions, literature, and songs over time
- ❖ Drawing upon different sources of data to uncover different points of view
- ❖ Reading historical narratives imaginatively and interpreting what they convey about the humanity of the individuals and groups involved.

**Introduction**

Corridos, as a world ballad tradition, afford teachers and students a primary source based on an oral tradition that spans nearly two centuries. Corridos reflect the evolving perspectives and concerns of urban and rural working-class peoples from the United States and Mexico. Using the lyrics and music of the corridos along with the accompanying website, students will have the opportunity to analyze written texts, visual images, and objects to develop their understanding of various themes, regions, and perspectives of North American history. What's more, the strategies presented in these lesson plans are easily transferable to musical genres such as salsa, jazz, and other forms of folk music.

Corridos are distinguished by a narrative structure<sup>1</sup>, that includes—

- ❖ Singer’s initial address to the audience
- ❖ Location, time, name of main character
- ❖ Importance of main character
- ❖ Message
- ❖ Main character’s farewell
- ❖ Composer’s farewell

Most corridos share the following thematic and structural elements. The subject matter of corridos includes, but is not limited to: gun fights, social justice issues, betrayed romance, wars, and horse races. A main character is usually featured who may be heroic, tragic, villainous, or conflicted. The narrative discourse features<sup>2</sup> shaping corridos are as follows:

- ❖ Fate (anticipation, omen, chance)
- ❖ Pursuit (plans, coercion, chase, escape)
- ❖ Challenge (ridicule, offense, defiance, provocation)
- ❖ Confrontation (duel, battle, attack)
- ❖ Defeat (capture, imprisonment, sentence, execution, death)
- ❖ Judgment (reflection, deduction, advice, experience, lamentation)
- ❖ Farewell (memory, nostalgia, reputation)

While each of these themes and features may not be found in every corrido, understanding the structure and themes that tend to distinguish corridos will help students come to understand the form and analyze its lyrics on a deeper level.

## **Classroom/Internet Approaches**

### Adult Interviews and Collecting Artifacts and Images

You may wonder, why begin educational activities about a corrido exhibition by asking students to interview an adult in their life about the music they grew up with? The idea here is to illustrate how music and the narratives that surround them can become primary sources students may use to understand different periods of history and regional issues. With this understanding, students may draw upon the genre of corridos to learn more about the culture and historical issues of the Southwest and Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> This list of narrative structure elements is Guillermo Hernandez citation of Armando Duvalier’s work in “What’s a Corrido? Thematic Representation and Narrative Discourse.” in *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 1999 (18)

<sup>2</sup> These narrative discourse features are excerpted from Guillermo Hernandez’, “What is a Corrido? Thematic Representation and Narrative Discourse”.

In this activity, students interview an adult in their lives about the music they grew up with, focusing on songs that told a story and/or reflected important historical moments. Students may also collect song lyrics for one or two songs and/or memorabilia/images associated with the interviewee's music. Upon completion of the interview, students compare and contrast themes in their families' music with the themes in the Corridos.

Through the interview and collecting process along with the post-interview analysis students may personalize the corridos by relating them to music that is familiar to them. This approach also can facilitate students' understanding of family history and important social issues of other generations through music.

### Guiding Question

- ❖ How does music reflect the issues of its time and of particular communities? Consider both sound and lyrics.

### PART 1: Conducting the interview

- ❖ Developing Interview Questions:

*Ask students to develop questions that elicit a story about their interviewee's life and times. If they ask questions that can be answered with a yes or no, encourage them to ask follow up questions. Having students develop questions prompts them to learn about the interview process and become more engaged in the assignment.*

- Generate a classroom list of potential interview questions.
- Ask students to jot down 5-10 questions of their choosing (see Handout A).

### **Sample Interview Questions:**

1. When were you a teenager/young adult?
2. What kinds of music or musical artists were popular then?
3. What kind of music did you like to listen to? Who were your favorite musical artists?
4. What did they sing about?
5. When did you listen to this music? Follow up questions: Who were you with? What were you doing? What type of technology did you use to listen to music? (e.g., walkman, turntable, tape player, CD player)

- Students might also ask if their interviewee would share a recording (CD or tape) of a favorite song or artist. As the song is playing or afterwards, the student could ask—
  6. What memories does this bring back?
  7. Do you remember what was going on in the community...in the country...in the world when this song was popular?
  8. How do you think our times are different now?
  9. Do you remember what kind of music or musical artists your parents listened to?
  10. Did you like that music also?
  11. What did they sing about?
  12. What did they tell you about what was going on in the world when they were growing up?
  
- Guidelines for conducting the interview:
 

*Ask the students to begin the interview by explaining that they are learning about Mexican ballads called, "Corridos," and they are also learn about how music reflects its times. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about the music and experiences of their own family and community so they can compare and contrast it with other kinds of music.*
  
- Collecting artifacts/images
 

*In addition to the interview, students can collect song lyrics for one or two songs and/or memorabilia/images associated with their interviewee's music (See Handout A). If the interviewee doesn't have an album cover or an object associated with the music, the student might find a relevant image on the web or in a book.*
  
- Homework: Have students fill out Handout A (Parts 1-3).

## PART 2: Analyzing the information collected from the interview

- ❖ Ask students to share what they learned from the interview and talk about what it was like to conduct an interview.
- ❖ Sample Guiding Questions for this discussion—
  - What new information did you learn about the person you interviewed?
  - What kind of music did they like growing up?
  - What did you learn from the song lyrics and memorabilia they shared with you?
  - What did you learn about how their life as a young person was different from your own life?
  - How were their times different from your own?

## PART 3: Analyzing Corridos

- ❖ Assess prior knowledge
  - Ask them what they already know about corridos.
  - You might also ask them what they know about other forms of folk music and/or ballads.
- ❖ Develop guiding questions
  - Ask students to work in small groups to surf the “Learn” and “Listen” sections of the Corridos website.
  - After about 15-20 minutes ask them to write down three questions they have about corridos.
  - Generate a class list of questions that can be referenced throughout the unit.
- ❖ Analyzing the corrido
  - Distribute a corrido or ask students to select a corrido and have them work in pairs or small groups to fill out Handout B, “Analyzing the Lyrics of Corridos.”
  - Have the groups share their responses to questions 3 and 4.
    - What moments and issues in history does the corrido reflect?
  - Refer students back to the website to substantiate their responses. The “Listen” section and the timeline under the “Learn” section will be particularly useful to them.
  - At this point you may want to refer to the students’ list of questions to see how many have been addressed.

#### PART 4: Comparing and Contrasting Corridos with Other Musical Genres

- ❖ Ask students to use Handouts A and B to respond to the questions in Handout C.
- ❖ Use the questions in Handout C to guide a class discussion about the various musical themes and issues students identified in the corridos and in their interviews.
- ❖ Ask them to write an essay based on the information they gathered using the three handouts. The theme of the essay might be, "Music without borders: historical themes in song lyrics."

**Handout A—Part 1**  
Adult Interview Questions and Responses

***Interview Questions and Responses***

1. Question:

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Response:

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2. Question:

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Response:

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3. Question:

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Response:

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4. Question:

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Response:

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5. Question:

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Response:

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**Handout A—Part 2**  
Object/Image Analysis

Describe the object/image:

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What meaning did it have for the person who owned it?

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When was it developed?

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Who was the audience?

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What kind of story could you tell about the object/image?

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What themes or issues does it reflect?

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**Handout A—Part 3**  
Interview Summary and Analysis

1. When did your interviewee grow up?

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2. What kind of music was popular during this time?

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3. What kind of music did they like?

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4. Who were some of their favorite artists or songs?

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5. What did you learn about what the world was like when they were growing up?

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6. How are the present times similar to when they were growing up?

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7. How are they different?

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8. What do you think brought about these similarities and differences?

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**Handout B—Part 1**  
Analyzing the Lyrics of Corridos.

*Read through the Corrido and respond to the following questions..*

1. Corrido Title

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2. Author/Singer

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3. What is the song about?

a. How does the singer address the audience?

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b. Location and time?

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c. Who is the main character(s)?

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d. What is the main story/conflict?

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e. How is the conflict resolved?

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4. How would you describe the main characters and what values do they represent?

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5. List themes or topics you see in the corrido lyrics.

*a.* 

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*b.* 

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*c.* 

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*d.* 

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**Handout B—Part 2**  
Analyzing the Lyrics of Corridos

6. Choose one theme. What might this theme tell you about what it was like to live during that time?

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7. What moments/issues in history does the corrido reflect?

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8. In what ways does the corrido reflect contemporary historical themes?

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## Handout C

### Comparing and Contrasting Corridos with Other Musical Genres

*Use Handouts A (all parts) and B to respond to the following questions.*

1. How are the song themes you identified in your interview similar to the themes in the corrido?

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2. How are the song themes different?

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3. How do they reflect similar historical times or social issues? How are the issues different?

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4. Why do you think the issues or times are different?

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