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A Life's Passion

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The call came on the eve of his Los Angeles concert, just as he was leaving his home in Mexico. *We have your son. Follow our instructions. Don't make trouble.*

It was a year ago, and Vicente Fernández was about to headline four sold-out shows at the Pico Rivera Sports Arena, his annual Memorial Day pilgrimage to the Eastside suburbs of L.A. Now this voice, saying his 33-year-old son, his namesake, was being held for a ransom of millions. What was he supposed to do—about his public, about his child? His wife begged him to stay, afraid he would collapse if he tried to perform. Instead, he boarded his Learjet and headed north, praying, hoping, mourning. "You could just hear the pain," says his U.S. promoter, Ralph Hauser III, who met Fernández here at a private airport. "I told him, 'Vicente, I don't think this is a good idea. Let's cancel. The fans will understand.' "

Vicente Fernández is Mexico's greatest living singer. Four decades after his start on the sidewalks of Guadalajara, he inspires the appellations of a Sinatra or an Elvis: El Número Uno. The People's Son. El Rey, King of the Mexican Song. On stage, he wears an embroidered sombrero, an engraved pistol and a skintight leather cowboy suit. His sideburns are long and his mustache is narrow. His music is called *ranchera*, the folk anthems of the rural heartland. Backed by a mariachi of violins, trumpets and guitars, he embodies Mexico at its most romanticized—the Mexico of horses and maidens and tequila and cockfights, of honor, love, heartbreak, survival. Since 1966, he has released 54 albums, all in Spanish, and sold more than 43 million copies, nearly half in the United States. Invisible to much of America, even to much of Southern California, he is as revered in this country as in his own, embraced here by a parallel nation of expatriates.

The 20,000 fans who paid $37 each to see Fernández in Pico Rivera last May surely would have excused him—if they had known about the kidnapping of Vicente Jr. But Fernández was determined to keep it a secret. His motivation was partly pragmatic. The captors had warned him not to do anything that might alert police. By his own nature, though, Fernández was not inclined to cancel: He needed to perform, to tap into the mystical bond he shares with his fans, his gift to them and their gift to him, a lifeline that, now more than ever, he could not bear to lose.

"Whoever did this took the most important thing in the world from me," he said at the time. "I'm not going to let them take the second-most important thing." Coming from another singer, that might be dismissed as show-biz bluster. But Fernández, like his music, operates on an epic plane, without irony or artifice. He speaks with an ear to

posterity, taking the bromides of an old-school entertainer and infusing them with the weight of proverbs. "The people," he would explain later, "shouldn't have to suffer for me."

So, on Memorial Day weekend in the equestrian grounds of Pico Rivera—and, later, in Dallas and Miami and Minneapolis and San Diego— Fernández strode onto the stage like an ageless toreador, pride and poise concealing any twinge of weakness or doubt. He is not a large man, just shy of 5-foot-8 and slim enough to slip into 31-inch jeans. Before each show, hunched in his wool Aquascutum of London trench coat, he looks almost fragile; his eyes are dark and his cheeks sunken, his pallor that of a hotel room. But in his suede *traje de charro*—the uniform of the singing cowboy—the metamorphosis could not be more sudden or complete. His chest inflates. His shoulders elevate. His jaw snaps to attention. He compares the sensation to being wrapped in a Mexican flag, custom-made and hand-stitched by his personal tailor. Some outfits are spangled in antique coins, others in gold filament. The leather comes from the hide of unborn calves.

As soon as Fernández opens his mouth to sing, an even more remarkable transformation occurs. His speaking voice, a fixture of dozens of grade-B movies he starred in during the '70s and '80s, resembles a bullfrog's, raspy and tight. But once the horns break into a rollicking two-step or the strings signal a mournful waltz, Fernández's throat turns into something round and buttery, revealing a baritone of operatic dimension and control. It is instantly recognizable, thick and rich and smooth, embellished with tremors and tears, guffaws and whimpers, bending and cracking, from aching falsettos to swaggering roars. He has never taken a singing lesson and has no patience for warmup routines. He scoffs at lozenges, sprays and teas. His only trick, he likes to say, is that he sings from the heart: In mid-song, he will stop the music and drop his microphone, the purity of his voice—unamplified and a cappella—turning the crudest arena into a cathedral.

His concerts always begin with the same maxim, a pledge he honored even during the kidnapping. He delivers it in the third person—using the Spanish diminutive for Vicente—but what might sound like hokum is, again, a solemn vow. "As long as you keep applauding," he tells the audience, "your 'Chente' won't stop singing." Nearly three hours and 40 songs later, he will still be on stage, summoning one more encore, then another, lipstick smearing his cheeks and perspiration bleeding through his layers of calfskin. Four and a half hours is his record. This is not music as consumer product, fabricated and disposable. For Fernández, *ranchera* is the oral history of a nation, the cry of its joys and its losses:

I'm leaving now, defeated.
My heart is aching
Because the love of my soul
Left me so alone.
I'm going to wander,
I'll try to find some peace,
But if this hurt goes on,
Don't be surprised if a cantina becomes my home.

At the end of his first Pico Rivera show last year, Fernández began to crack. "He carries a big burden," says Hauser, who is bringing Fernández back on May 30 and 31. "He feels it's his responsibility to make his people and his country look good." The crowd rose to its feet. Fernández turned and left the ring, holding in his tears until he was out of sight.

It was as if the chaotic future of Mexico had run headlong into the dignity of its past. Driven by economic upheaval and political breakdown, kidnapping has become a growth industry, an untapped market for organized criminals and their badge-wearing guardians. Fernández represents not only a more gracious Mexico, but a gradually disappearing one, a culture shaped by the saddle, rooted in the ranch. As an icon, he might best be compared to Roy Rogers or Gene Autry, the mounted heroes of a less cynical day. In a world that worships new faces and new sounds—if for no other reason than that they are new—his songs never flirt with the contemporary, no mention of narcos or coyotes, Prop. 187, Zapatistas or NAFTA. Yet, rather than be dismissed as a relic or novelty act, he is heralded as a savior, Mexico's keeper of the flame.

His message beckons everyone from bleached debutantes in leopard-skin dresses to silver-toothed farm workers in Aztec ponchos, gangbangers, executives, boxing star Oscar De La Hoya and the entire roster of Guadalajara's champion soccer team, the Chivas. South of the border, he serves as an antidote to the convulsions of a modernizing state: stability amid insurrection, corruption, devaluation. He is no less vital to Latinos on this side of the Rio Grande, whether undocumented migrants or third-generation Chicanos, whose language and identity—their very presence—have come under political attack. Daniel Acosta, the manager of a sporting goods store in the central highlands of Guanajuato, says: "Vicente speaks to us about how we are . . . like there's a piece of us in him." Veronica Rodriguez, a Lincoln Heights native who is studying to be a court reporter, says: "The way I look at Vicente, I just feel, like, God, anything's possible. He shows it's OK to be Mexican."

That role never was more celebrated, or tested, than in 1998, a year that, professionally, would stand as the most satisfying of his career and, personally, the most trying. His four Pico Rivera concerts were followed in the fall by three swankier dates at the Universal Amphitheatre—the 13th consecutive year he has sold out every show, at each venue. In a first for him, he performed the theme for a *telenovela*, riding horseback through the introduction of "La Mentira,"—"The Lie"—which just ended a six-month run as one of KMEX-TV's highest-rated programs. The song raced up the charts last summer—and is still in the Hot Latin Top 10, 44 weeks later—an extraordinary feat for a genre of music that is considered too folksy, even in the Spanish-language market, to fit most commercial formats. Its success sent L.A. radio stations scrambling: Three now devote an hour to Fernández's songs every afternoon. Billboard inducted him into its Latin Music Hall of Fame. The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce added his star to its Walk of Fame; officials were stunned to see a crowd of 4,500 turn out for the ceremony, twice that drawn by the previous record-holder, Michael Jackson.

Instead of savoring the adulation, Fernández reckoned with its price. He followed instructions. He made no police report. He canceled no concerts. Neither did his

youngest son, Alejandro, also a singing sensation, whose last album sold even better than his dad's. When the media caught wind of the story, throwing the negotiations into turmoil, family members insisted nothing was wrong. In truth, Fernández had begun to doubt his own homeland; as the ransom demands spiraled, he ordered almost everyone in his family to take refuge in the U.S.: kids, grandkids, in-laws, cousins. Weekends, he found his escape on stage. Weekdays, he returned to the solitude of his home, counting the minutes, watching for cars, living for each ring of the telephone.

At one impasse, the kidnappers called, threatening to chop off Vicente Jr.'s fingers. "How can you mutilate another human being?" Fernández asked. He got no answer. And so he waited, week after week, month after month, May, June, July, August, September.

***El Hijo Del Pueblo*/The People's Son**

Guadalajara is the capital of the Pacific Coast state of Jalisco, a colonial treasure of 16th century palaces and Churrigueresque churches perched on a mile-high plain in the western Sierra Madre. With a population pushing 4 million, it is Mexico's second-largest city, yet retains much of its Old World propriety and custom. It is considered more conservative—more Catholic, more Spanish—than the nation's capital, 360 miles to the east. It is home to the only professional soccer team in the country that requires every player to be a Mexican citizen. It is the official producer of all tequila. And it is the cradle of mariachi.

Vicente Fernández Gómez was born 59 years ago, to a ranching family, on the city's fringes. They lived in a dirt-floor adobe in the village of Huentitán El Alto, near the municipal rodeo arena, where horses still mix with jalopies on the rutted streets. As a musical credential, it is a bit like being a bluesman from the Mississippi Delta or a country star from the prairies of Texas. "There are other singers of *ranchera* music who sing very beautifully but you can tell from the way they sing that they never lived on a ranch," says Fernández, who left school in the fifth grade. "They never knew what it was to milk a cow, to birth a calf, to shoe a horse. I've lived all that." When he was a teenager, the family's cattle business collapsed and the Fernándezes headed north, to Tijuana. Their existence went from cheerful, if rustic, to urban and desperate. "With the education I had, all I could do was work as a burro, in whatever I could find: shoeshine boy, janitor, dishwasher, waiter, bartender, cashier, bricklayer, painter," Fernández says. "I've always said I got to where I am, not by being a great singer, but by being stubborn, by being tenacious, by being pigheaded."

The song he considers his most autobiographical, "*El Hijo Del Pueblo*," speaks to those early lessons:

It is my pride to have been born in the most humble of neighborhoods,
Far from the bustle and false society . . . .
I go through life very happy with my poverty
Because I don't have money, I have a lot of heart.

He began singing when he was 8 or 9, mimicking the mustachioed cowboys he heard on the radio and saw in the matinees. In that time and place, entertainment was not dependent on a plug in the wall; people got together and made their own music, the soundtrack of birthdays and *quinceañeras*, weddings and funerals, the life-and-death battles of roosters and bulls. To a large degree, Mexicans still celebrate that way, employing thousands of minstrels and troubadours on both sides of the border, a communal archive, accessed for a few bucks a tune. Unlike much of America, which has grown a bit too self-conscious and sophisticated for sing-alongs, Mexico cherishes its shared musical lexicon: Drinking songs. Love songs. Fighting songs. Patriotic songs. Standards that almost everyone knows—cannot help but know—just as almost everyone in this country once knew the words to "Amazing Grace" or "This Land Is Your Land."

In 1961, at the age of 21, Fernández made his move. He returned to Guadalajara and headed for the city's proving ground, the public square outside the San Juan de Dios church, a landmark known as Mariachi Plaza. With hundreds of musicians competing for business every night, Fernández would chase after cars, waving his arms like a huckster—"Hey, mister, you want a song?"—and accepting whatever payment his audience thought it was worth. "He used to follow all the mariachis around, begging us to let him sing," recalls Francisco Zapata Raitán, a 58-year-old trumpeter who has been roaming the old downtown plaza for decades. Over time, it has turned seedy, crowded with drunks and beggars and urchins. "I guess Vicente must have known something," he says. "We're still here."

After two years of hustling on the streets, Fernández decided to gamble on Mexico City, the nation's arbiter of fame. He landed a job at a mariachi-themed restaurant, El Amanacer Tapatio, singing table to table for tips. He was becoming a practiced vaudevillian: Each song was like a one-act play, three minutes to pour out his heart and reel in a crowd, a bit of theater that always managed to feel genuine. But when Fernández went auditioning for a contract, the record companies treated him like a rube. Even the label that would later sign him—the label that he has remained with for 33 years—slammed the door, twice. "They told me that I should go sell peanuts, that my voice didn't 'register' for a recording," Fernández says. "It wasn't like now, where they say, 'Let's make an artist,' and overnight they create a monster."

Discouraged, he returned to Guadalajara, marrying his neighbor María del Refugio in 1963. He calls her "daughter" and she calls him "son." They would have four children together—he would also produce a scandalous fifth with a mistress—but it is the story of the first-born that has become a staple of the Fernández legend, a measure of his grit and authenticity. "Cuca," as his wife is known, had been carrying the baby for six months. Fernández was back on the restaurant circuit, singing 100 requests a night, walking home at dawn. In the span of a week, his mother died and Vicente Jr. was born.

To have a chance, the premature child needed an incubator. The hospital wanted 150 pesos a day. Instead, as Fernández tells it, Mexican ingenuity saved his son. He took Vicente Jr. home and put him in a basket, surrounding the tiny infant with hot water bottles. Then he strung up a lamp overhead and screwed in an orange bulb. "Like the kind they use in meat markets," he says, "to keep the carnitas warm."

Mexico's No. 1 singer at the time was Javier Solís, the latest in a line of musical idols marketed as symbols of national identity. Each gave voice to the aspirations of post-revolutionary Mexico: the humble *campesino* standing up to the rich *hacendado*, a loyal rogue, poor but free, masculine without being macho. The first of the great crooners, Jorge Negrete, succumbed to liver disease in 1953. He was 42. The next— Fernández's favorite as a boy—was Pedro Infante, who crashed his plane into the Yucatán peninsula in 1957. He was 39. Solís, the third in the pantheon, died after gallbladder surgery in 1966. He was 34. That same week, Fernández got a call from CBS Records, which had remembered him from his Mexico City days; suddenly, it seemed, they were in the market for new talent.

Fernández was a perfect fit, a bighearted country boy, salty and blunt. He would often tell people that a good rancher needed only two things in life: "an old lady and a mule." Then the punch line: "Just be sure the mule is not too old and the old lady is not too much of a mule." His early albums—"The Rustler," "The Card Shark," "The Death of a Cockfighter"—show his chest bursting from an unbuttoned shirt, his hair whipped into a jet-black pompadour and his sideburns inching toward mutton chops. Instead of acting boorish, though, he preached a proletarian gospel: valor and responsibility over indulgence and pretense. "There are two kinds of people in this world," he would say, "the poor rich ones and the rich poor ones."

He wrote few of his own songs, borrowing many of his musical trademarks from another *ranchera* icon, José Alfredo Jiménez, who composed "*El Hijo Del Pueblo*" before drinking himself to death in 1973, at 47. As indebted as Fernández is to the folk heroes before him, there is no comparison. He did not grow spoiled or reckless, ruining his health, falling under the spell of leeches and yes men. If once he sang to live, he now lives to sing. The melding of his public and private faces is the key to almost every story Fernández tells about himself, a mythology that dates back to one of his earliest performances at Mexico City's historic Teatro Blanquita. Barely 30, with only a couple of albums under his belt, Fernández was a bundle of nerves backstage, worrying—as he still does now, a quarter-century later—that someday the dream would expire, that the curtains would part and expose him to a sea of empty chairs. "His greatest fear is that the people won't love him anymore," says Sony Discos vice president José Rosario, whose label later bought CBS.

Just before his cue, Fernández got the news. His father had died. Fernández choked back a cry. There was no question about what he would do. There never would be. It was the one thing he knew how to do. The only thing he would ever know for sure.

***Una Noche Como Esta*/A Night Like This One**

The kidnappers waited until Vicente Jr. had left his father's ranch. It was a late May afternoon and he was in a white Jeep Cherokee, heading back to his own house in Guadalajara. The ranch is on the outskirts of the city, a 400-acre spread with cobblestone roads leading to a white Spanish-style mansion, landscaped with peacocks and a man-made lake, a chapel and a swimming pool in the shape of a guitar. Since the birth of Vicente Jr., Fernández had delighted in calling him his *potrillo*, his colt. After his second

and third sons, Gerardo and Alejandro, Fernández named his place *Los 3 Potrillos*, carving the faces of three young horses into the arched stones of the front gate.

Guns drawn, the kidnappers forced Vicente Jr. off the road. They covered his head and tied his hands. They delivered him to a house in a ratty section of Guadalajara and shut him in a windowless room. They kept him chained and blindfolded. As the days passed into weeks, he learned to calculate the time by counting his breaths, 320 per hour. He listened for the chatter of birds at dusk and the call of roosters at dawn. When he finally worked up the courage to ask his captors for something to read, they gave him a Bible. "God squeezes," Vicente Jr. kept telling himself, "but he doesn't choke."

Since Mexico's bitter recession of 1995, the business of abduction has boomed. The act is almost always mercenary: liberty for cash, leverage from a life. Although anyone with an ATM card is vulnerable, the gangs have taken aim at the nation's elite, snatching bankers, politicians, doctors and, earlier this year, the father of soccer star Jorge Campos. For Fernández, one of the ironies of his life is that he is considered in that company. He believes he has lasted so long atop the *ranchera* throne precisely because he has never thought of himself as royalty. "The bigger an artist is," he likes to say, "the smaller he should feel." Even as his trappings grew lavish—a $1.5-million jet with a pair of pilots on standby—Fernández never acted like a jet-setter, never forgot he was the People's Son. How could it be that his own people now viewed him as a lucrative target?

He performs almost every Friday and Saturday—about 80 to 90 shows a year—but returns to his ranch first thing Sunday morning. His hobby, his sole diversion, is a testament to both his earthiness and riches: He breeds miniature horses. His stable numbers more than 100, mostly appaloosas, some no bigger than a dog. He dotes on them, tinkering with bloodlines, studying ultrasound monitors, giving names to his newborns. Two are U.S. national champions. Another pair were given to Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo after he and his wife asked Fernández to serenade them on a recent tour of Guadalajara. Each day, at 2 p.m., Fernández breaks for dinner with Cuca. They sit in a kitchen with three refrigerators. Photos of their nine grandchildren cover each one.

He does not have an agent or a publicist. There is no kingmaker pulling strings behind the stage. He handles his own business matters and, until recently, his own legal affairs. "When I first met him, I asked, 'Who's your lawyer?' He didn't have one, which is really amazing when you think about everything he's done," says Jane Macon, a miniature horse breeder in San Antonio and a partner in the prestigious law firm of Fulbright & Jaworski. She sold him a horse and now does much of his paperwork for free. "I'm treated like family, and he wouldn't expect a member of his family to charge him."

Until the kidnapping, Vicente Jr. managed the ranch. Alejandro, who got his start opening his father's shows, is managed by Gerardo. To book either, you speak to Fernández's niece, Any. His nephew, Pepe, is his valet. His tailor, Lucio Ugalde, lives in one of his spare homes. His musicians, the 13-piece Mariachi Chapala, have been with him almost from the beginning. He pays well but demands devotion. "The day he stops calling me *cabrona*"—his hardheaded goat, affectionately speaking—"is the day he

doesn't love me anymore," says his sound engineer, Griselda Jiménez, who inherited the job 16 years ago from her father.

In concert, Fernández sings without frills: no introductions or song lists, background vocals or prerecorded playback. He crosses himself and kisses his fingertips, then bounds onto the stage. As soon as he hears the first strains of a tune, no matter how many times he has performed it, he clenches his fists, arches his spine, closes his eyes and rocks on his toes. "Aaayyyiii!!!" he yowls. His fans leap to their feet, waving and swaying, singing each verse at full pitch—with him, to him, for him. Men thump their chests and hoist their beers. Women, some as young as his own teenage daughter, deluge him with flowers and love notes, swooning and squealing, stripping off their panties and bras. There is an intimacy, a reciprocity, to Fernández's concerts that is rarely matched in the secular world. Onstage, his body becomes a conduit, drawing from and feeding into the collective emotions of his fans. He spills his guts and they spill theirs back, sweating, kissing, drinking, weeping, a mosh pit of ecstasy and pathos. "What he achieves is really a mass hypnosis," says his keyboardist, Javier Ramírez. "I've learned a lot about music from him, but I've learned even more about psychology."

In the middle of a song, fans will hand him cellular phones; he serenades right into the mouthpiece. At a show in Mexico, an anonymous admirer once slipped him a hand-scribbled napkin: "Sir, you would look better without sideburns . . . not that you look so bad now." The next day, Fernández shaved. Every few songs, they reward him with liquor, cups of beer, bottles of tequila, leather bota bags that could contain just about anything. Few know that Fernández almost never drinks. He is dry before the show and, after, sips only water. But onstage, alcohol becomes a part of the communion: he takes a slug of everything he is offered. The exchange sometimes unnerves his friends and family, but Fernández shrugs them off. He does not have a full-time security team and chides entertainers who do.

"What are they protecting us from?" he asked a reporter from *Furia Musical*, a Mexican music magazine. The interview was published last May, a week before the kidnapping. "If it's the public that loves us," he added, "it's really the public that protects us."

His shows often include a hymn, "*Una Noche Como Esta*," the prayer of a man whose life is measured in applause:

God's greatest gift to me is this voice,
Which more than mine, belongs to my people.
If singing like this
I have earned your affection,
I would be happy if, singing like this,
One day, I die.

To a skeptic, such an outpouring might border on the mawkish, an exaggerated stereotype of Latin heat and schmaltz. But at its best, when the music is charged with passion and a virtuoso is interpreting the words and the audience is attuned to all the

intricacies and allusions, something magical occurs: in Spanish, the word is *desahogo*, a cathartic release, the shiver of a song touching the soul.

"Anyone can sing this music, but to make people feel, to give them goose bumps, it has to come natural—you can't be an actor," says Nydia Rojas, a mariachi prodigy who got her start in the taco joints of East L.A. During the kidnapping, she opened for Fernández in Pico Rivera, the second year she had done so. The first time, when she was just 16, she approached him backstage and asked for advice. "Go out there and try to stick it to me," Fernández said. When she was done, he greeted her with a kiss and whispered, "Very nice, child." Then he invited her to join him for a duet. "I was about to cry," she says. "There's no one higher than Vicente, except maybe God."

***Acá Entre Nos*/Just Between Us**

The negotiations seemed endless, back and forth, on and off. There were flurries of calls, then weeks of silence. Fernández's lawyer found a consulting firm, Black Fox International, which advises that kidnappers usually settle for just 10% to 20% of their original demands. The numbers, though, kept soaring, $5 million, $8 million, $10 million—with no guarantee that Vicente Jr. would be returned alive.

Within a week, the story began to leak out, mostly in erroneous spurts. A Mexican TV station reported that one of Fernández's sons had been kidnapped, implying the victim was Alejandro. While the station went live with its exclusive, Alejandro showed up on a competing network, insisting the entire family was fine. There were rumors of a publicity stunt—a charge that unfairly dogged another son of a famed singer, Frank Sinatra Jr., after he was kidnapped near Lake Tahoe in 1963. Fernández stayed silent, afraid any mention of the crime would jeopardize his son. Two months after the abduction, near the end of July, Vicente Jr.'s name finally made the news. Anonymous sources said he was free.

"You can't imagine how badly that hurt us," says Fernández, who believed he had been close to a deal. The kidnappers, he adds, "called up, really angry, wanting to know who was giving out information." They also wanted more money. Vicente Jr. was going to pay the price. His captors summoned a doctor. He brought tools and anesthetic. The guards turned up the TV and stereo, hoping to drown out any cries.

"They told me that they had cut off one of his fingers and that I should go look for it," Fernández says. "I never found it. Can you imagine?" The kidnappers called back to say they had done it again. The second finger, too, failed to arrive.

Fernández continued to tour, but he now took precautions, traveling with a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol in his bag. Even before the kidnapping, he had lived more warily than he likes to admit. Although he has visited every corner of the Spanish-speaking world, he can tell you only about the room service and lodging. Onstage, he may hold nothing back, but to venture out, without getting mobbed, he sometimes resorts to a disguise. He bought his jet less for the luxury than for the seclusion. He shops in tony

boutiques, like Bijan on Rodeo Drive, partly because they will close their doors for him, locking him safely inside.

On days that he sings, he kills time by sketching. He favors cowboy scenes and self-portraits. He draws them on eggshells. As soon as the show is over, he retreats again, racing back to the hotel before his sweat starts to chill. He takes the hottest shower he can stand and climbs into bed. He calls Cuca and swallows two sleeping pills.

"Sometimes, I'll go to his room and, basically, tuck him in," says Sony executive Rosario. "We'll talk until he gets tired or falls asleep, then I'll let myself out. You have to remember, he's had such a rush, such a high in front of the public, then to go back to his room, with nobody there . . . It can be pretty lonely."

During the kidnapping, sleep came even harder. His appetite soured. Friends feared he was falling ill. "I'm not looking too depressed, am I?" he asked his crew one night. He worried about his fans and whether they would think him a bad father once they learned the whole story. What kind of man would perform under such conditions? What kind of man could? Some concerts were agony; others, his only respite. They usually featured a song, "*Acá Entre Nos*," that demanded all of his composure:

Just between us,
I'll remember you always.
And now that you're not at my side,
I must confess
That I can't endure.
I'm hating without hate
Because I breathe through a wound.

El Rey/The King

Fernández's music has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, in large part, because its future looks so fragile without him. *Ranchera* may be treasured, but it will always be more vernacular than commercial, and its place in the new and globalizing Mexico is anything but secure. If you flip through a big-city radio dial, even in tradition-bound Guadalajara, you are more likely to hear bubbly Latin pop or American Top 40 than songs about cowboys and gamecocks. Take away Fernández, the biggest name on the marquee, and it is like reggae without Bob Marley, or what the blues might become after B.B. King.

There is also the question of an heir. Until a few years ago, the answer would have been obvious: Fernández's own son, Alejandro, now 28. He began singing *ranchera* as a child, exhibiting a voice that was deep and curvaceous, more polished even than his father's. They have toured together and recorded duets. By the early '90s, Alejandro had released five albums and the line of succession seemed to be cinched. But Alex, as he is often called, is not a son of the people. He embarked on a singing career because he was a Fernández, not because he needed to eat. "Everything evolves," he explains. "I'll always sing *ranchera*, but as an artist, you want to explore, to do the most that you can." In 1997,

he left Mexico to team up with the Midas of the Latin world, Cuban-born producer Emilio Estefan, husband of pop diva Gloria. The result—a multimillion-selling, Grammy-nominated collection of heartthrob ballads—transformed him into an international superstar. For his father, it was nothing short of treason. "I worry a lot about Alejandro," Fernández says. "He thinks different from me. He says he can do both things, *ranchera* and pop. But I say there's greater value in dedicating yourself to just one thing, and doing that one thing well."

The one chosen by Fernández is uncompromising and sacred. "When you're a *ranchera* singer, you represent your country," he says. "It's a God-given gift." Pop, as he sees it, is a flavor-of-the-month confection, all posturing and cosmetics. "We're talking about two different things here: those who fight for their roots and those who sing to make money."

For several years, Fernández has been hinting at retirement, insisting he will "never defraud the public" by performing past his prime. He stopped making movies in 1991, mindful that age had begun to erode his sex appeal. He has vowed to show the same respect for his voice, to go out with class, not like Sinatra or Elvis: "No one will ever be able to say, 'Ay, Chente, he's all washed up. He should have thrown in the towel years ago.' " He cannot say precisely when that moment will come, though he sometimes mentions the year 2000. He has no model to follow; all the *ranchera* kings before him were enshrined before they had a chance to grow old. He is not only the last of a breed, but the first to live long enough to craft his own legacy. He already has recorded 300 songs—enough for 30 albums—to be released after his faculties fail him. He even has posed for the cover art, preserving his image for when he is gone.

In show business, no matter the language, Hollywood is the conferrer of immortality. Yet the question of America, his place in it and its acceptance of him, is fraught with ambivalence: like many Mexican artists on this side of the border, Fernández does most of his work behind a one-way mirror. He speaks little English. He has never courted a "crossover" audience. Although he has been nominated six times for a Grammy in the Mexican American category, the award always has gone to a more recognizable, Americanized performer: Vikki Carr, Selena, the Texas Tornados. The market for *mexicanismo* here is so vast, yet so culturally segregated from the U.S. mainstream, that Fernández can be a hero to millions and still be virtually unknown. "What do I have to do?" he once asked in a moment of frustration. "Do I have to die?"

When his date on the Walk of Fame finally arrived last year, the scripted photo-op that usually draws a couple of hundred onlookers erupted into a jubilant street party. The morning had been cold and rainy, but fans spilled into Hollywood Boulevard for hours, some arriving before dawn. They waved hand-lettered signs and homemade collages, Mexican flags and a patriotic rainbow of balloons, green, white, red. Vendors hawked bootleg merchandise, from Fernández T-shirts to Fernández watches. Someone handed out free headbands: "Vicente Forever." At least eight Spanish-language radio stations from across the U.S. were transmitting live from the site, including KLVE and La Nueva, the city's top-rated in any language. As the crowd billowed into the thousands, traffic

and commerce ground to a halt, aggravating the half of L.A. not in the know and thrilling the half that was.

"This day is . . . " began City Councilman Richard Alatorre, stepping up to the podium.

"Unforgettable!" shouted the crowd, nearly drowning him out.

"Simmer down," cautioned Hollywood's "honorary mayor," Johnny Grant.

While they waited in the middle of the street, several fans began to sing, soon joined by others in the crush, until they had united in a spontaneous chorus, hundreds of voices, all at the top of their lungs. They picked what is probably Fernández's most fabled tune, "*El Rey*." Or "*El Rey*" picked them. It is another one of those songs that belongs to no one and to everyone, a song that millions of Mexicans have sung at picnics and barbecues, in cantinas and *taquerias*, imbuing it with all the sanctity of a second national anthem:

With money or without money,
I always do what I choose;
My word is the law.
I don't have a throne or a queen
Or anyone who understands me,
But I'm still the king.

The scene was frenzied enough that Hollywood officials decided to speed up the presentation, ferrying Fernández to the microphone 15 minutes early. "This is not my star," he told the crowd. "It is from Mexico to all of you!"

Then he returned their impromptu offering with one of his own, "*El Hijo Del Pueblo*," which concludes:

I write my songs
So that the people sing them to me.
And the day that they don't,
That day I'm going to cry.

***México Lindo*/Beautiful Mexico**

Tucked inside the stables, next to the miniature appaloosas, there is a lumpy old rocking chair covered in plaid. A pack of cigarettes is stashed nearby, hidden in the crack of a crumbling pillar. Apart from the stage, it is the one place where Fernández feels most at peace, a seat to think and smoke and watch the *potrillos* be born. Whenever they clashed over music, he summoned Alejandro to this spot. Now, during the long, restless summer of the kidnapping, he came here again, slipping out of bed and wandering down at 1 or 2 a.m., shivering in the darkness, waiting for tomorrow.

"They say that when my uncle dies, this is where he'll come out at night," his nephew, Pepe, says. One of Fernández's early records echoes that thought:

Beautiful and beloved Mexico,
If I die far from you
Let it be said I'm asleep,
And have me brought here . . .
Beautiful and beloved Mexico,
If I die far from you.

It was not until late August, three months after snatching Vicente Jr., that the kidnappers finally agreed to a deal. The Mexican media reported the ransom to be $3.2 million, a sum Fernández has refused to confirm. "My son is not a cow, an animal, or a product," he told the Televisa network. The drop-off could have been lifted from the pages of a spy novel: bundled cash, an unmarked plane and a pilot guided by a cell phone. Flying over the west Mexico wilderness, the money was hurled out the window. A new wait began. Two more weeks went by.

Late on the night of Sept. 11, as Fernández tossed in bed, there was a buzz on the intercom. It was his ranch hand, Rodolfo, calling from the stables. Cuca answered.

"Tell Don Vicente there is a problem with one of the *potrillos*," Rodolfo said.

Cuca passed the phone to her husband.

"What happened?" Fernández asked.

"It's one of the *potrillos*."

"Why can't you take care of it?"

"This is a *potrillo* that only you can help."

Fernández threw on a shirt and ran for the door, still in his underwear. He shot out of the house and onto the veranda, eyes wide in the blackness. There, 114 days after losing him, he found Vicente Jr. As he has done since his son was born, Fernández kissed him on the lips.

He called to Cuca: "It is a *potrillo*, but it's your *potrillo*, and he's fine!"

Vicente Jr. laughed. He appeared to be in good health. He seemed well-fed. He told his father he had not been beaten. But once inside, under the light, Fernández got a closer look.

"What's in your hand?" he asked.

Vicente Jr. had been covering his left hand with his right one. He let go. Now his father could see. There were two fingers missing, ring and pinky. They had been amputated, with surgical precision, just below the knuckle.

***Amor De Los Dos*/A Love Shared By Two**

The headlines rushed to judge: "*Potrillos* Leave Ranch." "Violence Makes Them Flee." "Looking to Forget in Texas."

The day after Vicente Jr.'s release, he and his parents had flown to San Antonio, where he reunited with his wife and four children. Fernández has a ranch there, one of several U.S. properties he owns and regularly visits. But this trip, under the circumstances, looked less like a stopover than an escape. A parade of popular Mexican entertainers, crime victims themselves, already had declared their intent to seek sanctuary in the north. To also lose Fernández, the personification of all that Mexico holds dear—that, for many of his fans, was tantamount to a death in the family.

Every Sept. 16, on Mexican Independence Day, the airwaves buzz with a 24-hour Vicente Fernández homage. Last year, more than 250 radio stations in the U.S. and Mexico participated, but the tribute could have been confused for a requiem. The honoree remained in exile. He had not acknowledged Vicente Jr.'s release. He had yet, for that matter, to confirm the abduction. When several suspects were arrested on New Year's Day—including one, "El Coyote," linked to a band of predators blamed for at least 50 abductions in eight Mexican states— Fernández had no comment. The kidnapping, he explained, was a "nightmare." He was eager to leave it behind him.

By then, though, his actions were speaking volumes—about himself and about his nation. After all that had happened, after everything he had lost and all he had salvaged, Fernández turned around and went back. He went back to Mexico, to the country that had spawned him, not to play for the glitterati in Acapulco or the industrialists in Monterrey, but for his people in the hinterlands: Uruapan, Celaya, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Querétaro. The shows he returned for were called *palenques*, which is to say they were the climax of a night at the cockfights. The concert is held in the cockpit itself, a dirt ring under a corrugated-tin roof, where the roosters pair off with razors tied to their legs. The duels are a cornerstone of Mexican folklore, marathons of drinking and gambling, infused with sexual symbolism, by turns noble, cruel, absurd. When the final contest is over and the last carcass hauled off, a custodian enters the pit with a dustpan, sweeping up the feathers and blood. Then the headliner bursts from his dressing room, jostling through the crowd, down a narrow staircase, into the circular battlefield.

"Thank you for making me feel like I'm in my home, with my family," Fernández told the audience one night last December in Tuxtla, the capital of Chiapas, as he stood in a ring still speckled with the detritus of bird.

Not only had he come back, but he had come back with his namesake. In the months after his release, Vicente Jr. had signed up as road manager, reacquainting himself with his father and his father's songs. "It's strange, because when they were young, it was my son Vicente who sang all the time, not Alejandro," Fernandez says. Alejandro eventually "was given the voice," as Fernández puts it, which for a time joined them together on stage. Now it was Vicente Jr. who wanted to participate, a triumphant duo out on victory tour. "Instead of coming back traumatized, he came back more humane,"

Fernández says. Vicente Jr. struggles to explain: “My life started over in September. I’m like a newborn right now. What else can I tell you? You’ll have to wait until I grow up again.”

It was almost 1 a.m. when the concert started, nearly four hours after the first rooster’s death. The tiny pavilion was smoky and close, an overflow crowd of 3,000 spilling into the aisles and blocking the exits, which only the aproned barmaids with their metal beer trays seemed able to thread. Fernández stood under the fluorescent glare of a bingo tote board, looking up at his audience from the bottom of the pit, surrounded and exposed. Every face in the house was visible: jowly impresarios in big-bellied guayaberas and adolescent beauty queens with studded tiaras, cowboys, athletes, peasants, even little children, eyelids drooping and arms wrapped around the necks of their dads. Within minutes, someone hurled a tequila bottle from the back, cracking open a man’s skull in one of the lower rows. Fernández stopped mid-verse. “He didn’t do anything to you, you damn coward!” he yelled at the troublemaker, restoring order with an artful string of four-letter words. Fernández wore a blue suede *traje de charro* and a sombrero as big as a truck tire. He gripped a cordless mike in his left hand, right palm over his heart. His chin was cocked back, lips pursed like blossoms. Sweat poured off his forehead and down his cheeks, soaking through his shirt and waist-length jacket, forming two album-sized circles in the leather under his arms.

Vicente Jr. sat in the front row, on a folding chair, within reach of anyone. He had on rumpled jeans and a windbreaker. Halfway through the show, Fernández motioned to him. Vicente Jr. climbed into the ring. “The eldest of my *potrillos*,” Fernández announced. The crowd surged, cheering, flashbulbs popping, a mixture of elation and relief. Vicente Jr. waved back, then clasped his hands. His father thanked everyone for their prayers. He was offering more than platitudes, though: something that might serve as a remedy for all he and his son, and his fans and his country, had endured. It is the only elixir he has ever known. He wanted Vicente Jr. to sing.

The song was one that helped make Alejandro famous, “*Amor De Los Dos*,” the first duet recorded by him and his father. Now, for a few unexpected minutes, it belonged to Vicente Jr., and to everyone else in the house. His voice warbled, hesitantly, groping for the key. He is not his father, or even his brother, but on this night nobody cared:

My life is your life,
A love shared by two.
You make me suffer;
One day you will pay.
There is no forgiveness for you.

His father’s face was growing red, his eyes puffy. He wrapped an arm around Vicente Jr., gripping the hair on the back of his neck. Their cheeks were almost touching. Fernández responded:

Forgive me
If I have offended you.

Forgive me,
Have pity.

The arena exploded. The people wanted more. Here was the Mexico that Fernández believed in. This time, he did not hide his tears.