

Ricardo Arjona Sings to the Mojado

[Agustin Gurza](#). [Los Angeles Times](#). Los Angeles, Calif.: [Mar 13, 2006](#). pg. E.1

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In the provocative new music video for his latest single, "Mojado" -- or "Wetback" -- popular Latin American singer-songwriter Ricardo Arjona stands on a Tijuana beach at the dividing line between Mexico and the United States. Stretching behind him is the controversial new wall being built to separate the two countries. In front of him is the vast, unfenced sea.

The jarring juxtaposition underscores the pro-immigrant message of this Guatemalan-born artist: Man may make borders, but God created the Earth for everybody. In a Spanish-language verse that is bound to inflame the already superheated debate on the issue, Arjona cloaks illegal immigration in a mantle of morality:

Why do they chase you, Wetback / If the Consul in the heavens has already granted you a visa?

Though the video was filmed on Mexico's northern border, Arjona says the lyric applies equally to its southern frontier with his native country where Guatemalans are allegedly mistreated trying to enter Mexico.

"Without a doubt, the solution lies less with the United States than with our own countries because they have been unable to sustain their own sons and daughters on their own land, forcing them to look elsewhere for what they can't find at home," Arjona said in a phone interview from his home in Miami. "Now that doesn't mean that people who cross the border without papers should be treated like animals. That's another story."

With "Mojado," the singer launches the latest salvo in one of the most divisive issues facing the U.S. today. He also echoes the views of Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, who recently championed the cause of the undocumented during a defiant Ash Wednesday sermon, urging priests to oppose a proposed law requiring churches to check immigration documents before offering assistance to the needy.

Arjona says the momentum of the debate so far has been unfairly tilted toward border-control advocates, prompting him to speak out on the other side.

"People get used to hearing the news every day on television or in the papers, but when you hear it in a song, the problem takes on a different shading," he said. "I felt bombarded by the constant assault of news ... people who die trying to cross, the speeches from politicians who came as immigrants to this country and now stand completely against other immigrants. It all hit me as an author and this song is the result."

There is a long and storied tradition of Mexican artists speaking out in support of undocumented immigrants. One of the most popular and audacious examples is the 1980s norteno classic by

mariachi superstar Vicente Fernandez, "Los Mandados," in which an illegal immigrant boasts about being deported hundreds of times and admits beating up gringos as revenge for beatings he suffered at the hands of La Migra.

But this is the first time in recent memory that a Guatemalan artist, especially one of Arjona's stature, has weighed in on the issue musically, and with a video that is being broadcast on Spanish-language music stations in the United States.

For "Mojado," Arjona joined forces with one of the most popular norteno bands, Texas-based Intocable. The unusual duet -- combining artists and styles from separate pop music realms -- adds power to the song and weight to its message.

"I think the song can be easily adapted to any reality," said Arjona. "It could apply to Spain's reality with the people from Africa, and to many other places. In fact, it's a universal problem that confronts us constantly -- the enormous discrimination that exists against these people, the little worth that is given to their huge labor force."

The U.S. Border Patrol gave permission for the two-day shoot in November, says the video's Los Angeles-based director, Simon Brand. But the federal agency also issued a warning in case a crew member decided to slip illegally into the country: "If we see someone running, we're going to shut you guys down."

The black-and-white video -- which also features interviews with migrants poised to cross the border illegally -- was recorded at various locations near the I-5 junction with the border in Chula Vista. At the beach site near a Tijuana bullring, the border wall being built by the U.S. remains under construction. Posts have been placed in the sand, leaving enough open space between them for somebody to walk through.

If viewers could pan back for a wider shot, they'd see the cinematographer's dolly track laid out on the beach, straddling both countries on a strip of sand. The moving camera was able to go where the predominantly Mexican video crew could not -- back and forth freely from one side of the border to the other. The Border Patrol's fears were ultimately unfounded: Mexican crew members were so worried about making a false step they almost tiptoed when coming right up to the line to take close-up shots of border markers.

"I just found it very interesting that you take one step and you're in another country," said Brand in a phone interview from his native Bogota, Colombia. "The crew was very sensitive about not stepping on the U.S. side, but all the immigrants we were shooting, they didn't care. They weren't nervous at all."

Brand was in Colombia to cast his new feature film, "Paraiso Travel," about a star-crossed Colombian couple who immigrate through Mexico to New York in pursuit of happiness, only to find hardship. Although he was familiar with immigration issues, he says he learned much about its human dimension while talking to real migrants for the "Mojado" video shoot.

One man, he said, had lived in the U.S. for 30 years and was working at a naval base painting ships when he was deported. He was poised to cross the border and get back to his family and the only world he had known since childhood.

"When you hear their stories, it's so moving," says Brand, 35, who became a naturalized citizen after immigrating to the U.S. 16 years ago. "I'm an American, and I always hear what we have to say, but you never hear the other side of the story. That's what I was exposed to now, and it was very compelling to me."

Known for his socially conscious songs, Arjona, was honored in Los Angeles this week by ASCAP, the composers and songwriters association, with its Heritage Award for his career contributions to Latin music.

He originally wrote "Mojado" three years ago for solo acoustic guitar and had planned to perform it on "Premios Lo Nuestro," a popular Latin music award show airing nationally on the Univision television network. But he says producers thought the theme was "too strong" compared to the normally tame fare on Spanish-language TV.

Arjona resurrected the number for his recent album, "Adentro," and Intocable added the norteno arrangement. The new version starts with Arjona's original mournful guitar, then breaks into the punchy, accordion-driven beat that is so popular among Mexican migrants.

The upbeat treatment, says the songwriter, makes a somber topic much more accessible to the public. "I was surprised how the song was transformed by the arrangement," Arjona says. "It gives the tune a power it didn't have before."

"Mojado" debuted at No. 50 this week on Billboard's Hot Latin Tracks; it ranks No. 27 for airplay on regional Mexican stations, according to Radio & Records, a trade magazine.

Arjona admits it's not the kind of number that burns up the charts, but he's satisfied that it's been steadily finding a receptive audience: "A song never starts a revolution ... but it can provide the accompaniment."