

Romancing the Swallows: Music, Film, and Nostalgic Tourism in San Juan Capistrano, California

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Each year the Southern California town of San Juan Capistrano celebrates its “*Fiesta de las Golondrinas*,” a three-month festival honoring the return of its migrating swallows to its historic Spanish mission. The celebration draws enthusiastic local participants, as well as thousands of regional and national tourists. The pageantry-filled celebration itself is the outgrowth of over a hundred years of sedimentary layers of novels, songs, and films. In the 1910s, Father St. John O’Sullivan arrived in San Juan Capistrano, charged with tending to the long-neglected mission. His popular 1930 collection of local tales, romantically titled *Capistrano Nights*, enmeshed the mission in swallow lore. Several years later, O’Sullivan’s story of the mission’s returning swallows was further amplified by the songwriter Leon Rene, who penned the celebrated song *When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano*. The record sold three million copies and the melody became part of the public romance with San Juan Capistrano. Soon, The Ink Spots, Glen Miller, Guy Lombardo, Pat Boone, and even Bugs Bunny were crooning the Rene ode to the swallows. By the 1940s, the mission was serving as the backdrop for scores of Western films, including the *Bells of Capistrano*, starring celebrated cowboy-actor Gene Autry. More recently, Jim Carey’s *Dumb and Dumber* character referenced San Juan Capistrano’s swallows in a joke, indicating their enshrinement in popular culture.

Today, the various components of San Juan Capistrano’s Swallows Festival celebrate a romanticized, lore rooted in assorted filmic, musical, and novelized tropes. These events encourage both locals and visitors to don old-time Western wear and partake in imaginative, playful encounters at various town sites. Events range from a *Fiesta Grandé* (billed as a “night of Wild West entertainment”) to Hoos’Gow Day in which a festival sheriff and his posse sporting Wild West attire cart a makeshift portable jail around the downtown zone, pausing to theatrically lock up residents and tourists not wearing Western attire (captives must bribe their way out by purchasing a sheriff’s badge or garter). The Swallows Parade itself features school children and other groups costumed as swallows, along with indigenous dancers, and the usual marching bands. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, this paper addresses the ways film/novel/song-inspired ludic play during the festival’s various events are entangled with nostalgic yearnings for imagined pasts in which human/animal (swallow) relations, gender relations, and relations between indigenous and white community members are embodied and imaginatively reconfigured by different local and tourist actors with varied personal, emotional, and (in some cases) even political visions.