

It's Only Rock 'n Roll  
pero me gusta  
Review Article

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*Michael A. Olivas*

In the summer of 1960 or 1961, when I was 9 or 10, I lied to my parents, telling them that I was going to sleep over at Ricky Dodson's house. Instead, I spent my entire savings on a \$4.00 ticket to see Little Richard in concert at the Albuquerque Civic Auditorium. I was astounded by the show, and changed my mind about wanting to be Hank Aaron, whom I had idolized ever since he had beaten Rocky Colavito on Home Run Derby. I wanted to be Little Richard, or at least a rock and roller, maybe Al Hurricane, who was Albuquerque's rock and roller. He and his brothers, Baby Gaby and Tiny Morric, went through several incarnations, variously styling themselves as the *Sentimentalists*, the *Al Sanchez* or *Bert Nelson Band*, finally settling on their stage names. But in 1963-64, when my eighth grade classmate Tony Matteucci was getting a band together, I had neither the talent nor the permission from my parents to join his group, which evolved into *Thursday Love*, a popular local band that specialized mostly in covers of the *Beatles*, *Buffalo Springfield* and *Cream*. Tony went on to be a successful session drummer in Los Angeles, and bass-player classmate Michael Goodroe had his 15 minutes of fame with the *Motels*.

But back to Little Richard. I was astounded to see more blacks than I'd ever seen (New Mexico's population, even today, is less than 2% black), but truly knocked out to see that nearly everyone else was Mexican—even though the state was (and is) almost half of Mexican origin, and even though the Civic Auditorium was in the heart of Martinez-town. To me, at 9 or 10 years old, Mexican music was *Valentin de la O's* television show (a Spanish language Lawrence Welk on a local station), mariachis in Old Town or at the Santa Fe Plaza, or the corridos and rancheras that were beamed by powerful radio transmitters in Texas and Mexico. Living at 5500 feet (or 7000 feet in Santa Fe, where I went to high school) meant the clandestine radio I snuck into my bedroom and my seminary dorm could pick up all kinds of music. On a clear night I could

even pick up Wolfman Jack.

Little Richard must have noticed how Mexican his audience was, because he launched into several songs by Ritchie Valens, dedicating them to the audience "from one of ya'll, Little Ritchie Valens." Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that Valens was Mexican (or as we called ourselves in New Mexico, "Hispanos"). I knew Al Hurricane was really Al Sanchez, but his band mostly covered regular songs played on the radio. Soon after, *Cannibal and the Headhunters* opened for the *Beatles* on their first U.S. tour, and although they didn't come to Albuquerque. I read every bit of information on them, once I found out they were a Mexican American band. Of course, I also read with interest that the Beatles considered Little Richard one of their most important influences, and I prided myself on having so successfully pulled off my furtive night at the Civic Auditorium. Also, in March, 1963, the Beatles backed up Chris Montez and Tommy Roe on a tour through the United Kingdom, and most Mersey groups were covering Chan Romero's "Hippy Hippy Shake."

In high school seminary, I became the coordinator for the school's jukebox, following in the footsteps of the erstwhile Ernie "Specdy" Sanchez, who in 1963-64 had ordered the first U.S. release of the Beatles, several months before KVSF began to play British imports. Today, Ernie is an entertainment lawyer in D.C., and was counsel to National Public Radio. As with any such enterprise, the jukebox took on the personality of the person running it. I programmed local favorites: always some Al Hurricane, "Little Latin Lupe Lu" and "Cherry Red 'Vette" by the *Viscount Five*—some Albuquerque classmates who reigned in 1966 as kings of Albuquerque rock, *Patsy Quintana and the Living End*—an execrable Española band with a loyal following among seminarians from the Española area, a lot of Motown and Atlantic stars—beginning a lifelong affair with Aretha Franklin, the *Four Seasons*, and a subspecialty of Latino artists—Trini Lopez, Domingo Samudio (Sam the Sham), Chris Montez, *Cannibal and the Headhunters*, ? (question mark) and *The Mysterians* (Rudy Martinez), *Sunny and the Sunglows*, Carlos Santana, and of course, Ritchie Valens. I even chanced across a 45 rpm of "Big Baby Blue" by Arvee Allens, and I tried in vain to convince classmates it was Ritchie Valens, since it was published by Del-Fi, Valens' original record company. I later bought a re-recorded version from Del-Fi, with Ritchie Valens' name on the label, winning \$5.00 from Fr. Sam Falbo, who hadn't believed me. I always made sure that groups with New Mexico connections—Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs, and Buddy Holly, who recorded in Norman Petty's Clovis, New Mexico studios—were included.

All this is by way of reviewing Beverly Mendheim's new book, *Ritchie Valens, The First Latino Rocker* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1987, \$10.00). The book, apparently written in fits and starts over the last dozen years, was amended to capitalize on the release of "La Bamba," the popular movie based upon Ritchie Valens.

There is no doubt that Ritchie Valens is an attractive subject. In his brief time, he was popular and his death in the same plane crash that took Buddy Holly and J.P. Richardson assured him of a place in rock and roll memory (best memorialized in Don McLean's "American Pie") as an unfulfilled talent—not James Dean but more like Otis Redding. Although there was a trickle of records in the pipeline after his death in 1959, it wasn't until the 1981 Rhino releases *The History of Ritchie Valens* and *The Best of Ritchie Valens* that his music was widely available.

Mendheim, an ethnomusicologist, performs a valuable service in tracing Valens' roots in Southern California, commenting upon his brief professional career, and assembling a useful discography. She conducted a wide set of interviews with family members and associates, and refers to many newspaper clippings and other source materials, many of them very fugitive, to establish a place for Valens as the "First Latino Rocker," a claim that is arguably correct.

But what of it? Tracing musical influences is important work but a chancy business. Understandably, Mendheim tries to show Valens' influence upon others—and few seem unaffected in her search: She finds his spores in the later works of the *Kingsmen*, the *Isleys*, the *Ramones*, *Led Zeppelin*, the *Beatles* (on "Birthday"), and countless others, most recently *Los Lobos*. She summarizes: "The capsule history of the Chicano/Latino rock scene points to one fact: were it not for "Donna," "La Bamba," and to a lesser extent, "Come On, Let's Go," in essence, were it not for Ritchie Valens, this musical scene may have turned in a totally different direction which may have lessened the impact of the Latin background as a substantial musical element." Heavy, convoluted stuff for a singer whose contributions were so minor. To be sure, singers from Johnny Crawford to *Los Lobos* (a genuinely talented and likely influential group) have covered Valens, but they've also covered thousands of other writers and singers. Does that mean they were "influenced" by them? Did Chuck Berry beget all who have followed? Led Zeppelin's "Boogie With Stu" is clearly derived from Valens' "Ooh, My Head," and Zeppelin's company settled a suit with the company that owns the rights to "Ooh, My Head." However, while Mendheim cites with approval a description of the Zeppelin derivation as a "plundering," and characterizes the settlement as having "incriminating terms [best] kept confidential," she cheerfully con-

cedes that the song's "blues progression is almost note for note imitative of Little Richard's 'Ooh, My Soul,' with some crucial differences." In truth, groups "plunder" or "imitate" each other all the time, and it is impossible to trace the paternity of most three-chord progressions.

Mendheim could have been more definitive and interesting if she had stuck to placing Valens in a fuller context of Mexicans in U.S. life in the late 1950's. She makes odd assertions, as in characterizing Valens (nee Valenzuela) as "güero" when his features were identifiably and recognizably Mexican. She mischaracterizes Sal Barragan, a member of *The Silhouettes* (Valen's first band) as "Italian." Despite the book's title, she insists that "Ritchie Valens was not the very first rock star of Hispanic heritage, nor of Chicano heritage," citing Li'l Julian Herrera (who was actually Hungarian, but adopted by a Chicano family), Baldemar Huerta (Freddie Fender), Chan Romero and Pérez Prado. These are curious inconsistencies for a study of an ethnic singer, if he was in fact ethnic. Mendheim doesn't carry the burden of persuasion here: Valens, even with his anglicized name, may have been an influence on young Latinos who aspired to become rockers, but his music is a much more modest contribution than she allows. Tito Puente, Carlos Santana, or Los Lobos have made much more identifiable stylistic contributions, even before the sound track of "La Bamba."

This is not to say that the book has no merits. It is interesting and covers a lot of new material (though it contains several errors, such as her memory of "the day the music died" being 1958 instead of 1959, or misspelling *Sir Douglas Quintet's* Doug Sahm as Doug Sham). It is a curious window into racism in the 1950's music business, where whites covered black songs and "foreign sounding" Mexican or Italian names had to be anglicized in order to be commercially viable. The Bilingual Press has published a much better book, Gary Keller's *Chicano Cinema* (1985), in which perceptive essays place the treatment of Mexicans in film into their sociopolitical context (e.g., official Mexican protests over derogatory depictions, William Randolph Heart's warmongering films, D.W. Griffith's "Greaser" films).

Mendheim's book, like the movie, "La Bamba," performs a useful service, and it has a good beat, but you can't dance to it.