

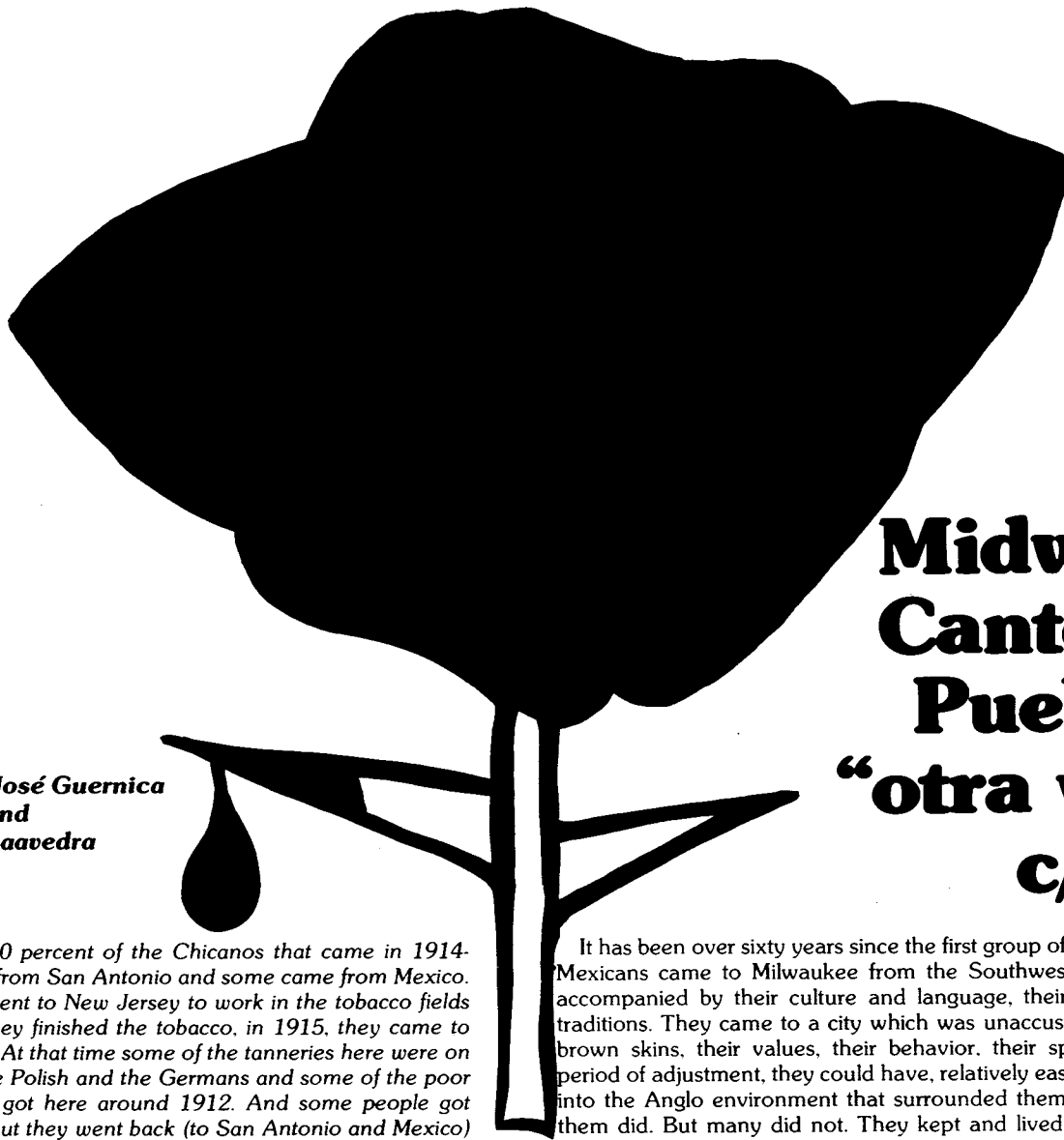
AGENDA



VOL. 7, NO. 3 NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA MAY/JUNE 1977



hispanics
in the
arts



by Antonio José Guernica
and
Pilar Saavedra

El Midwest Canto Al Pueblo: "otra vez, c/s" *

"About 70 percent of the Chicanos that came in 1914-1915 were from San Antonio and some came from Mexico. They first went to New Jersey to work in the tobacco fields and after they finished the tobacco, in 1915, they came to Milwaukee. At that time some of the tanneries here were on strike by the Polish and the Germans and some of the poor whites that got here around 1912. And some people got jobs here. But they went back (to San Antonio and Mexico) because of the strike. So what the companies did was, three of the tanneries got together and went to the Southwest and recruited over 150, maybe 250, people to work in the tanneries. But the biggest problem was that the companies didn't tell the people in San Antonio that the people here were on strike. So they came back in 1916 and found themselves in the middle of a big strike. . . . What the companies did was that before the people got here, just under the viaduct, the big bridge on South 6th Street, they had a camp of tents and they had restaurants. They had jukeboxes. They had stores. They had everything for the people that were coming in. So they lived in that concentration camp for a number of years because of the strike. But the people didn't know that there was a strike. So that thing there, that happened in 1916, 1915, still haunts us today. Because we happened to be just strikebreakers, scabs. . . . The strike got beaten because of the Chicanos that came here. But I want to make it clear that our people didn't know there was a strike. . . . We still have maybe five to seven people of the original pioneers that came here in 1916."

(Ernesto Chacón, Latin American Union for Civil Rights, one of the many organizers of El Midwest Canto Al Pueblo.)

It has been over sixty years since the first group of Chicanos and Mexicans came to Milwaukee from the Southwest and Mexico, accompanied by their culture and language, their customs and traditions. They came to a city which was unaccustomed to their brown skins, their values, their behavior, their speech. After a period of adjustment, they could have, relatively easily, assimilated into the Anglo environment that surrounded them, and some of them did. But many did not. They kept and lived their Mexican heritage as they learned to function and deal with an initially alien surrounding.

One of the ways they preserved and revitalized their identity as Mexicans was through the celebration of holidays such as El Cinco de Mayo (Mexican Independence Day from France), and El Dieciséis de Septiembre (El Grito de Dolores). The Chicano community would get together, enjoy its food, play its music, make its speeches, and celebrate the joy of being Chicano. As the Mexican community in Milwaukee grew, so did the celebrations. El canto del pueblo Chicano grew in volume and intensity. More voices joined the chorus.

At first the song was only heard within the Chicano community of Milwaukee. But as the years passed, the notes floated over to the rest of the Hispanic community. The melody started to reach the ears of the rest of Milwaukee. Different cities within the state of Wisconsin—Racine, Oshkosh, Sheboygan—began to harmonize. Between April 29 and May 8, 1977, the Chicano community of Milwaukee sang of its identity so loud and sweet that it attracted listeners and singers from the East and West coasts, from the Northern and Southern boundaries of the United States, all wanting to participate in this year's composition: El Midwest Canto Al Pueblo.

El Midwest Canto Al Pueblo was a successful effort to bring artists, poets, musicians, and cultural workers together in a setting

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*"Con safos," in Calo, the language of the barrio, is a curse to safeguard one's "placa" or personal signature-coat-of-arms from harm or erasure.

conducive to a free and easy interchange of ideas and directions in order to reaffirm, share, and celebrate the identity of La Raza with el pueblo. The activities during the ten-day festival ranged from poetry readings, to theater groups, to Chicano music marathons, to art exhibits, to slide presentations, to workshops, to critical readings on Chicano poetry, to the painting of murals, to a Mother's Day celebration, and beyond.

But an undertaking such as El Canto does not develop of its own accord. There have to be organizers, composers. There are committees to be formed, facilities to be found, money to be raised, participants to be contacted, schedules to be made, activities to be coordinated, and problems to be solved. The problems were not long in coming.

When El Canto was first planned, it was going to be held in the Performing Arts Center (PAC) of Milwaukee. The organizers of El Canto were under the impression that the Center was going to be made available to them, but it did not turn out that way. Reimundo "Tigre" Pérez, a Chicano poet and one of the principal organizers of El Canto, explains the situation:

"The problem with the Performing Arts Center was that we didn't get a written agreement with them. We got a verbal agreement in which they stated that we would have access to the PAC. And we were counting on it. So all our plans were set around the PAC. We were later informed that we didn't have the PAC. That created a lot of problems because we had planned to centralize all the activities there. We were put in a situation where we had to fragmentize the entire Canto. . . . When we were informed that we wouldn't have the PAC we had to resort to setting El Canto up in whatever space was available. We were notified at a very late date. The confusion this created had some impact on the effects of El Canto. Now whether this was deliberate or not, we were later informed that the PAC was available on the days we had requested. This represents the type of mentality that we have to deal with. . . . That's one of the problems, part of the evolution of dehumanization that we are trying to deal with, which has to be done."

Due to the unavailability of the Performing Arts Center, the Canto activities had to be moved to various sites around the city: Crystal Palace, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, Marquette University, St. Aloysius Church, and various community centers. Attendance at some of the events, particularly those held in the community, was not as high as expected due to this fragmentation. But wherever the Canto reached, the people savored it like golden honey.

El Midwest Canto Al Pueblo was realized with little money; it had to be done that way. Funds that were expected never came through. Funding proposals that were submitted were denied. The reasons given: the proposals were either too late or did not fit the funding guidelines. So the organizers turned to the community. Bar parties, dances, lunches, raffles were all held to raise capital for El Canto. Approximately 55 volunteers worked up to 10 hours a day and donated their money to make preparations for El Canto. Local businesses and organizations contributed funds for the success of El Canto.

José Ortiz, who has lived in the Milwaukee area since the 1930's, helped to collect funding for El Canto, contacting local businesses and asking for donations. Ortiz owns and operates a hair styling shop in Milwaukee and would sometimes request contributions from his customers as he cut their hair. In between haircuts, Ortiz took the time to express why he got involved in El Canto:

"My involvement in El Canto Al Pueblo is quite small, but esthetically my involvement has been a for a long time, in fact, my whole life. I have always believed that being Mexican is something, it really is. Sometimes people kid me about being Mexican and I go along with it, which is fine."

Sometimes I say that if it wasn't for the Mexican people there wouldn't be any sunshine in the world. . . . Our parents liked El Cinco de Mayo, they still kept the same traditions and customs. El Dieciseis de Septiembre y El Cinco de Mayo. This was back in the 'forties, and as far as I can remember, even the 'thirties. I was only a little tyke. And our parents would come out and get together. They would make the food and have the music, the acts, the speeches, el grito. And it came from the heart. They meant it. The young people at that time would always say, 'Hey Ma, hey Pop, you can't do that here. This is the United States. You have to forget that stuff.' And I used to laugh at these kids and say, 'What's the matter with you guys? It's good to keep two customs and know two languages because the more you know the more knowledgeable you are. The ones that are my age now are trying to get back these old traditions and customs. They're trying to bring the Cinco de Mayo things back, but you see the thing that's failing them is that they don't have it here, in the heart anymore. They tried to forget them and they did a good job forgetting them. Now they're trying to bring it back, which is good, but somehow they've lost it. . . . And if we don't bring back these things, we are all going to die. We're going to become robots."

This spirit of giving was also shared by the artists and performers. The large majority of them paid their own way to El Canto, coming from as far as San Diego, to participate in the activities without payment. Dr. Ricardo Sánchez, a well-known Chicano poet and another of the main organizers, tells how he sees El Canto and the role of the participants within the Canto itself. Sánchez did some time in prison and is currently a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

"Este Canto Al Pueblo es un festival. Vinimos a celebrar nuestras obras, nuestro arte, nuestra estética y, al mismo tiempo, para hacer un proceso pedagógico, concientizador para la comunidad. . . . It's consciousness-raising and at the same time a celebration of our art. It's also a bringing together of some of our best cultural workers, best in terms of most gifted, most articulate, most effective. . . . No queremos aquí politiquiar. Estamos como obreros culturales para el bien del pueblo y el pueblo puede dictar lo que quiere hacer. No nos creemos capataces, dioses, o sacerdotes. Somos gente que trabajamos con la cultura, con el arte, para desarrollar pensamientos y presentárselos a la gente. Si lo quieren aceptar, bueno, y si no, es cosa del pueblo. Es cosa linda."



Cover of booklet, Zarco Guerrero exhibition, artist unidentified.



Mario Acevedo (Torero)



Barney Bush



John Turdell



Arnold Vento



José Ortíz



Lorna Dee Cervantes



Las Cucarachas



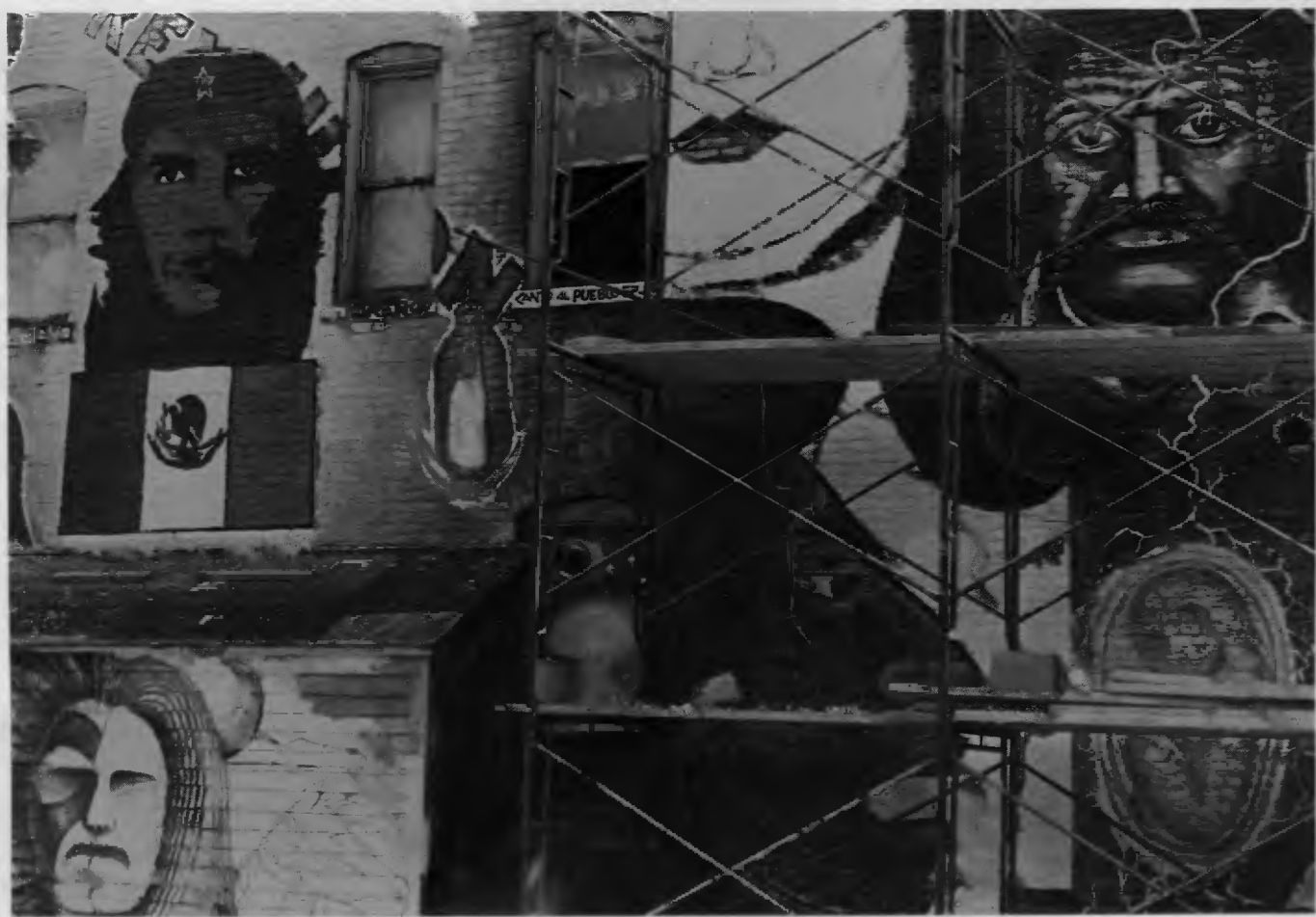
Alurista

Alurista photo by Lorna Dee Cervantes



*by Antonio José Guernica
and
Pilar Saavedra*

**El
Midwest
Canto Al
Pueblo:
“otra vez,
c/s” ***



Mural. 5th Street and National Avenue. Milwaukee. Wisconsin.

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