

The Chicano Movement in Houston and Texas: A Personal Memory

by Carlos Calbillo *cls*

The four major themes of “Chicanismo” are generally considered to be: (1) the power of the creative earth and labor upon it; (2) political transformation through collective efforts; (3) strong familial ties extending back into Mesoamerican pre-history; and (4) spiritually-influenced creative artistic imagination as reflected in the visual ARTS.

Well, what a long and strange trip it was, or should I say, has been. Carlos Guerra is gone, Lupe Youngblood is gone, Poncho Ruiz, El Tigre, Ernie Valdés. And Mateo Vega, if not gone, is certainly missing in action or something like that. These names are some of the brothers; there were also sisters that I worked with in the movement beginning in, for me, April 1968.

The Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s was essentially a grassroots community insurrection and rebellion against a stifling racism and oppression that strangled the Latino and Black communities of Houston and Texas in that time, and a determination to fight and defeat it. We sought to bring the Mexican American out of second-class citizenship and out of the societal marginalization that we found ourselves in at the time throughout Texas.

Like many social movements throughout the world then and since, this movement began with the youth of the afflicted community. These energetic shock troopers, tired of the oppression found throughout Texas and the nation, threw themselves into this task in an attempt to rehab the karma of the surrounding Anglo American majority society and to achieve full citizenship for our people.

We began by registering our people to vote in the large cities and even in rural communities throughout Texas. This kind of community empowerment met with retaliation from the police and Texas Rangers in the streets and in the fields. Many of us spent time in county jails or city lockups, charged with mostly minor offenses, which would keep us off of the streets, and silenced, in Houston and beyond. Police departments throughout Texas began surveillance activities, and the FBI began to maintain dossiers on many of us.

My interest in working in my community and in the movement began in April 1968 when, one week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a solidarity march was held from Third Ward to downtown Houston. I participated in this march as a young student, and although there were the obligatory African American

and white ministers, priests, a rabbi or two in attendance, I became curious to see if I could find any Latinos in the large crowd. To my surprise, I found only one, other than me.

I walked up to him after the march and introduced myself to Leonel J. Castillo. He would eventually become the first Latino in Houston elected to city-wide office as city controller. Subsequently, he became the first Latino commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, appointed by President Jimmy Carter.

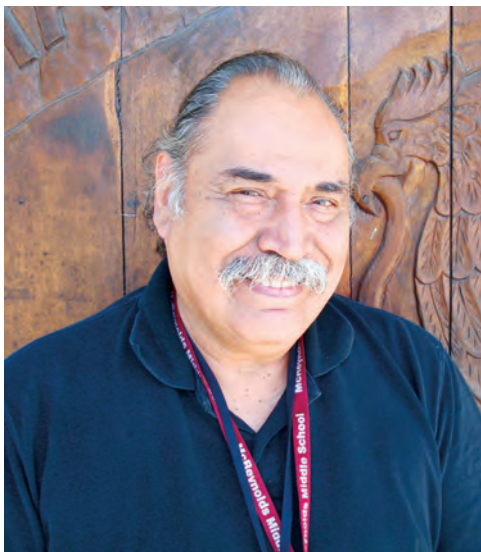
He invited me to his small office in the East End, where he worked as a social worker and counselor in some government funded program. He introduced me to a world that I found fascinating. PASO, the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations, was a sort of umbrella group that worked in community organizing and voter registration and education. I began to walk on weekends in the East End of Houston, and with other members of this group, registered Mexican Americans to vote and held rallies to educate our people on the importance of voting and basic civic involvement.

Through my long association with Leonel, I began to get more and more involved in Latino community politics, both as a campaign worker and in other, more “clandestine” activities with MAYO, the Mexican American Youth Organization.

I began my journey, if that is what it may be called, in a very different time in Texas, a time that we may want to recall and try to understand.

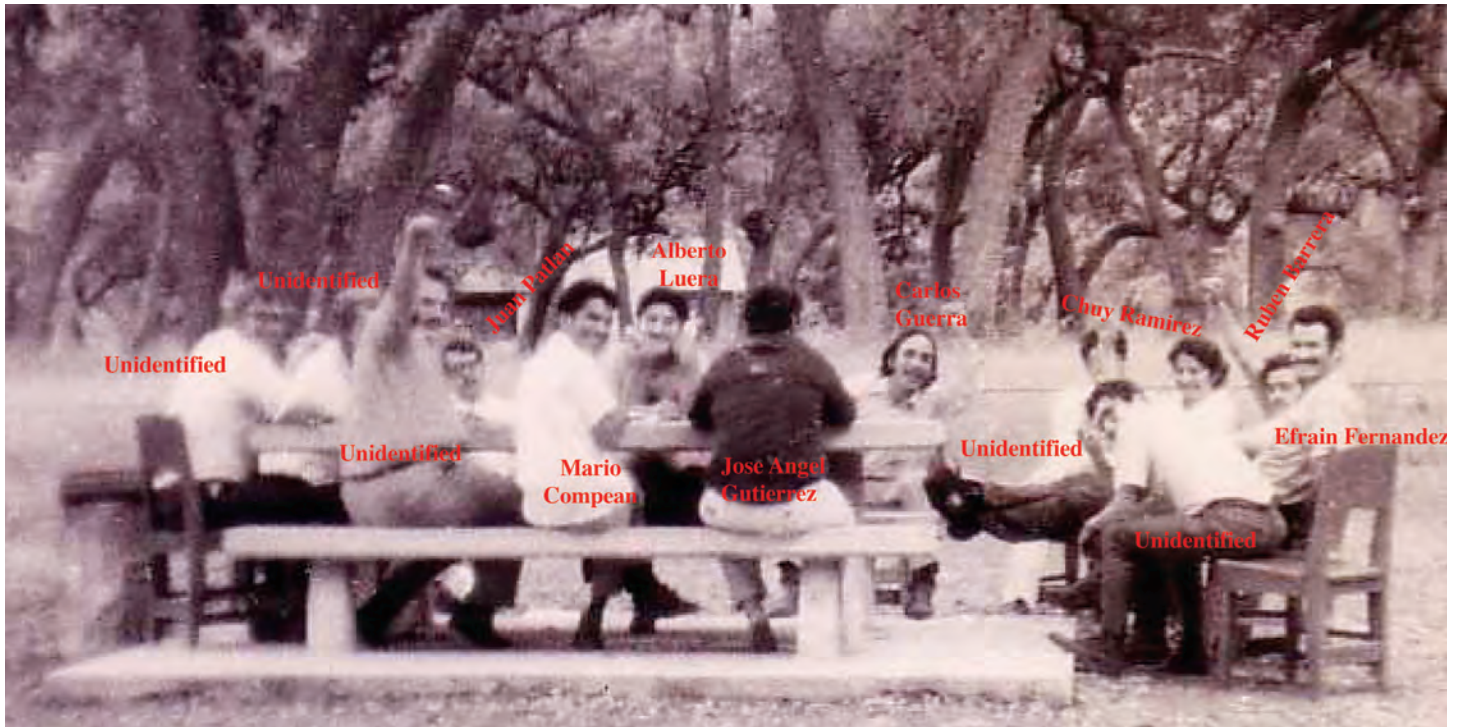
The Mexican American Youth Organization, or MAYO, was an upstart, headstrong group of young and militant Mexican Americans who appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, to challenge both the white racist establishment of Texas as well as the conservative HIGHspanic mentality of many Mexican Americans who had entered the middle class and, somehow, had come to believe that this developing paradigm, at least for them, was the future of *La Raza*.¹

Our fathers had returned after



Carlos Calbillo.

Photos courtesy of author.



Surveillance photo taken by the Texas Department of Public Safety of MAYO and Raza Unida leaders in Garner State Park, 1970.

Photo courtesy of author.

defeating Hitler and the Japanese, only to find that “Mexicans” were still second class citizens in the land they had fought to save, and which, once ours, had been stolen from us.

However, the great fight against fascism had taught them important concepts such as sacrifice and perseverance.

Some of these discharged soldiers, once back home, turned to a new war of liberation, not of Europe or of the Pacific, but of La Raza in Texas and in the Southwest. Many, if not most, also began a quest towards middle-class economic stability and respectability. With the GI Bill fueling a renewed political and social activism, it seemed to many in Texas’s Mexican American community that we would be witnessing the dawning of a new age. In some parts of Texas, there appeared to be a new opportunity and a developing pragmatism in race relations.

But we youth activists wondered if this was all for real.

Most of Texas during that era was still locked in the colonial model that we, the young chicanada, had begun to study in college or in the streets. By studying Marx, Lenin (both Vladimir and John), Che Guevara, and Frantz Fanon, (and of course, Tomás Paine), we understood that the oppressor would allow some progress for some of our people, as long as their basic model, their newer, and more modern Texas neo-colonialism, was not challenged or threatened. Since the time that we had lost at San Jacinto, and for most of the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, it seemed that the status quo in Texas was safe and unassailable.

The 1960s of course were a different time, and we as thinking young people were influenced and bombarded by the dominant American culture—the music, the militan-

cy; revolution was in the air. And of course the fashion—we wore bell bottoms, paisley shirts, and desert boots with our serapes and brown berets; we were young and crazy, some of us actually idealistic, trying to find a new way in the reality that was Texas of the times.

This society we perceived as intolerably oppressive, and it definitely seemed to us “enlightened” youth to be designed to keep brown and black people down. So we took up “arms” against it, much to the horror of our parents and other “*gente decente*,” such as LULAC and their ilk.

Houston MAYO cadres were urban and “hippy-ish”; many of us either didn’t speak Spanish or did so haltingly. When I began to attend MAYO actions in the small communities across South Texas (small compared to Houston) and discovered that some of the MAYO hermanos/hermanas spoke mostly Spanish, perhaps out of nationalistic zeal, I and many of the Houston MAYOs became uncomfortable around this.

One time we traveled to Robstown, Texas, to support a rally protesting the school system, which was designed not to educate our people, but to serve as an institutional bludgeon to keep the “Meskins” down and ignorant. Robstown was a perfect example of a small Texas town where the population was overwhelmingly Mexican American, yet the economics and politics were tightly controlled by the gringo establishment. This is perhaps why the town had produced some of the most militant and strategy-minded MAYO activists, such as Carlos Guerra, later a columnist for the *San Antonio Express-News*, and Lupe Youngblood, another incredible, young and charismatic trouble-maker who played chess against the establishment very well.

The rally was held in front of the MAYO



Army veteran Joe Campos Torres was beaten to death by Houston police in 1977. His death galvanized the Mexican American community in protests to fight for reforms.

Photo courtesy of Benny Martinez, LULAC.

headquarters in a down and out barrio, and about 100 community people, parents, and students were there, very angry, carrying protest signs in English and Spanish. Robstown MAYO chieftain Mateo Vega delivered a fiery bilingual speech and rant. The Robstown police, represented by several big white guys in coats, ties, sunglasses, and wearing large pistols prominently on their belts, walked around taking our pictures and generally acting like racist thugs out of central casting.

Carlos Guerra was present at the rally, and afterwards we all met to debrief. I will never forget that, unlike some linguistic ideologues in MAYO who considered those of us from Houston to be culturally *pendejos*, Guerra was a *firme vato* who looked upon us, his urban *hermanitos*, not with scorn or disgust but with a loving bemusement and an open attitude of inclusion.

Carlos of course, like many of us, was completely tri-lingual and spoke not only English perfectly but also a beautiful Texas Spanish and a stunning *pachuco cálo*.

From the beginning, Carlos and the other top leadership understood the need to unite and not to fight, something that we in the current political arena and climate sometimes appear to forget.

Another incident I remember with my friend “Charlie War” as some of us jokingly called him, was when MAYO and La Raza Unida Party had finally succeeded in taking over Crystal City and surrounding towns, and even entire counties. Jose Angel Gutierrez called for all chapters to meet and discuss future strategy at Garner State Park. It was a beautiful setting with picnic tables under the great oak trees, and we munched on *barbacoa* and *tripitas* as Jose Angel led us in discussion. We had all noticed several unmarked police vehicles on the periphery, and we could see and even hear their telephoto lenses clicking away.

Eventually, Carlos Guerra and several others, including me, made our way over to a parking lot at Garner where we had parked our junky cars. The lot filled suddenly with uniformed DPS troopers who began to berate, intimidate, and bait us in the way that only they could do. They wrote down the license plate numbers of our cars, which they seemed to

know well. Being new to this kind of political intimidation, I freaked out and began to back off. Carlos Guerra fearlessly went up to these sons of Texas and began educating them on the rights of American citizens to peacefully assemble and our right to meet without fear of governmental interference or of their intimidation.

Several of the officers seemed shocked and taken aback that their “right” to harass us was being challenged by this long-haired hippie who seemed not to fear them or anything else for that matter. They became upset but apparently decided that they had no excuse to arrest Carlos in front of witnesses; they muttered something and left.

Every time we visited Robstown, Carlos and others were there ready to assist us, their urban MAYO brothers and sisters, with a meal or a place to crash.

Meanwhile, back in Houston, MAYO was introduced to the city by an action fraught with danger. In the spring of 1970, our cadres broke into and occupied the Juan Marcos Presbyterian Church in the Northside as a protest against the lack of community centers to serve the many needs of Houston’s Mexican American community. This church sat vacant on Fulton Street for many years, while the Presbyterian Synod rejected requests to turn it over to the community for a social services center.

The now-occupied church was initially surrounded by Houston police, then SWAT officers, as the rumors spread that the youth inside were armed with small arms weapons and that we had set up defensive barricaded positions on the church roof, entrances, and windows. A standoff began with the police that was extremely stressful. Cooler heads among the city’s political leadership prevented a situation, which might have led to bloodshed, and eventually the Presbyterian leadership of Houston, through their synod organization, went to court against MAYO and got the youth “evicted” from the property.

MAYO had begun a series of protests outside of the city’s major Presbyterian churches, marching and picketing outside their Sunday morning services. This led in some cases to church services being cancelled at the larger churches. It

also caused the police and the conservative Hispanic community to consider methods to neutralize and isolate us from the greater community, as we were seen as irrational militants and revolutionaries. MAYO forged alliances with the New Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society, among others, and we began to work closely on issues of common interest.

In 1970, I took over the reins of *Papel Chicano*, which was a seminal effort to publish a newspaper



On August 15, 1971, a crowd estimated at 2,000-5,000 people attended an MAEC rally in Moody Park calling on residents to support a strike against HISD’s school integration proposal.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Litterst-Dixon Collection.



As reported in Space City News, "Pictured are the MAYO nine, from left to right: Hector Almendarez, Poncho Ruiz, Jose Campos, Carlos Calbillo, Santos Hernandez, Antonio Lopez, Greg Salazar, Walter Birdwell and Yolanda Garza Birdwell. As we went to press, we learned that seven were found guilty of disorderly conduct, Oct. 12 in corporation court. Receiving a \$200 fine were Greg, Yolanda and Pancho. Carlos, Hector and Walter were fined \$50 each and Jose was stuck for \$25. Lawyer Mel Friedmen is considering an appeal."

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Litterst-Dixon Collection.

that would present a new and independent perspective on news in our community, since we had no trust or faith in the conservatively run news media in the city. Houston MAYO members were well represented at the Denver, Colorado, Crusade for Justice Convention that year held by Chicano militant Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzalez.

In the spring of 1970, I had left Houston to travel to California to work with efforts there in community organization, representing MAYO. I helped organize the first Chicano Moratorium Against the War in Vietnam in Los Angeles, which led to a series of marches and rallies, cumulating in the "riot" in August of 1970, in which many persons were injured and arrested, and which resulted in the alleged murder of pioneer *Los Angeles Times* reporter Ruben Salazar by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

I worked on the campaign of Oscar Zeta Acosta, a local attorney who ran for Sheriff of Los Angeles County. Although he lost badly, the Chicano community used his candidacy as a means of educating others on police/community relations. I met his good friend, gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who nicknamed me "Laszlo" because I reminded him of a character by that name in one of his books. I was taken to Delano, California, by local union organizer Sam Kushner, and he introduced me to Cesar Chavez. The United Farm Workers were engaged in a bitter and violent strike against the lettuce growers, especially in the Coachella Valley of Southern California, and I joined this effort for a time.

Returning to Houston, I organized the Houston Chicano Moratorium against the War in Vietnam, and a march of about 1,000 persons took place in the historic barrio of Magnolia Park. The march snaked through the barrio and ended with a rally at Hidalgo Park, with various speakers including Leonel J. Castillo who delivered the keynote.

Most of the Mexican American community at that

time, as now, was extremely patriotic to the point of near-jingoism. During World War II, and in subsequent conflicts, especially the American government misadventure in Southeast Asia, more Medals of Honor and other accolades for bravery in combat were awarded to Chicano soldiers proportionately than to any other racial group. So it took some educational outreach to get Houston's Mexican American community to begin questioning our country's role in Vietnam and to speak out against it.

On the crucial educational front, Houston ISD began integrating the school district. The HISD school board, under the leadership of the supposedly liberal Citizens for Good Schools, instituted a phase-in integration plan, which called for a grade a year to be integrated beginning in 1970 with the first grade. Local African American leaders believed the pace was too slow, and William Lawson, a youth minister, asked Wheatley High School students to boycott school. Five days later, only ten percent of the mostly Black Wheatley students attended classes.

In 1970, a federal judge asked the district to speed the integration process. Some in the Latino community felt Latinos were being discriminated against when their children were paired with only African American campuses as part of the desegregation plan. Many took their children out of the schools and put them in "huelga," or protest schools, until a ruling in 1973 satisfied the demands, mostly, of the Latino community.

At first the district used forced busing, but later switched to a voluntary magnet school program. This had the effect of operationally keeping one-race schools in place, as is the current situation in Houston.

The Mexican American Educational Council was begun by community groups in an attempt to negotiate a resolution to all of this. Pitched battles between Black and Latino parents began to occur at some affected schools, especially at McReynolds Middle School in Denver Harbor, which was

one of the first to be “integrated” by busing Black students into the mostly Mexican American barrio and not bringing mostly Anglo schools into the desegregation mix.

On September 14, 1970, during an extremely contentious night school board meeting, a so-called “mini-riot” broke out in the HISD board room. Several MAYO members were beaten by police in the melee and MAYO members, including me, were arrested. The “MAYO 9” were charged with serious felonies, including conspiracy to riot. The community rallied, and we were released on bond. Through the work of pro bono attorneys, the charges were eventually dropped.

Through my increasing community work as an un-paid volunteer, I met many influential Mexican American community leaders, attorneys, judges, etc. In 1973, Judge Alfred J. Hernandez ordered me to go to KPRC-TV, the Houston NBC affiliate, to apply for a job. At the time, he was critical of the local TV and media outlets for having so few Mexican Americans working in their stations. Due to affirmative action, and through the tenacious pressure upon the station by Judge Hernandez, I was hired at Channel 2.

In June 1973, I walked into KPRC, a TV station owned by the politically connected Hobby family and the largest production house in the South at the time. I marveled at the huge studios where most of the local and regional commercial production was humming along. Even though the only thing I knew about TV was how to turn it on and change channels, I began my filmmaking and television career by hanging out and absorbing everything I saw.

This on-the-job training soon led me to the film production department where I produced documentary films that Channel 2 began to broadcast. With producer Tony Bruni, we developed and expanded *Reflejos Del Barrio*, a seminal local Latino community affairs program. By networking with other young Latinos in the local media, and there were only a few, we met John Quiñones, a local radio reporter who wanted to break into TV, but no one would give him a chance. Tony and I hired John, at no salary, to become the reporter and host of *Reflejos*, and his career took off from there. We gave other people their first “job” in TV,

including Mike Barajas, Evangelina Vigil-Piñon, and attorney Jose Rojo. We produced documentary films on Freddy Fender, Lydia Mendoza, Mance Libscomb, Ry Cooder, Flaco Jimenez, and ZZ Top; our scope was varied and eclectic.

In May of 1977, an incident occurred that triggered much community activity and protest. Joe Campos Torres, a young



Attorney Ernesto "Ernie" Valdés assisted Chicano activists by providing pro bono legal services.

Photo courtesy of Patty Lane.

army veteran from the Vietnam era, got into an altercation in an East End bar, and he was beaten and subdued by several Houston police officers who then handcuffed him and took him to jail. When they arrived on Riesner Street, the jail refused to take Torres because of injuries received in his beating and directed the officers to take him to Ben Taub Hospital. Instead, they took Torres to “the hole,” an empty lot leading to a ridge above Buffalo Bayou where he was beaten until dead and thrown into the bayou.

This incident galvanized the Latino community, especially of the East End. There were months of protest marches, picketing the police station, mass rallies, and marches. The anger at this egregious act united diverse groups in efforts to reform the police department and to establish good community relations above all. At KPRC-TV, I wrote and produced *The Case of Joe Campos Torres* with John Quiñones, now an ABC correspondent and reporter.

Then, in May of 1978, at a Cinco de Mayo celebration, a community-wide insurrection was triggered by an arrest at Moody Park in the Northside. This led to two days of riot police intervention and scores of arrests. This was considered by many to be an attack upon the community by the Houston police, so it was followed by more town hall meetings, protest rallies, hearings, and marches. Most of the Latino leadership, while condemning the violence on all sides, recognized that the community had been seething over the Torres incident for over a year, and it only took a spark to ignite the resulting conflagration.

As we enter a new century in Houston and elsewhere, the Chicano movement, although still very much alive, has changed direction. More and more of the old cadres have resolved to work within the system. Most scholars and activists consider that the Chicano movement has achieved much in current American society, and nowhere is this more evident than in education.

Departments of Chicano and Mexican American Studies at the high school and university levels are now common throughout the Southwest, and certainly in Houston. Many of the old militants gravitated into academia, becoming professors and mentoring new generations of activist youth—who are graduating in greater numbers and with an understanding of the movement and Chicanismo.

Certainly the Mexican American community of the United States, soon to be the majority population of this country, will need educated leadership in the years to come. The future of the Latino community, especially in Houston, is bright, although there remain many challenges. In education, our chicanitos will not only have to compete locally, but in an increasingly global economy and world.

It is a great time to be a Latino, with a foot in two countries and cultures, and with a new understanding of competition in the world and in our American reality, with a thought towards the many challenges ahead. ☞

Carlos Calbillo is a filmmaking instructor and filmmaker living and working in his hometown of Houston. He is currently working on a documentary film on emerging Latino political power in Houston and Texas. He can be reached at laszlorudock@hotmail.com.