



On Hispanic Education:

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La Bamba - A Chicano Anthem

The recent movie and music entitled "La Bamba" provide teachers with a rich source of insight and understanding of Chicano/Hispanic culture and the Chicano dilemma in the U.S. The movie is the story of Ritchie Valens (Richard Valenzuela) and it provides a good rendering of Chicano daily life and culture during the 50's. Teachers will want to compare that depiction from an earlier time to the life and culture of many Chicanos today, especially the migrant and the poor. La Bamba, as a song can also be used by teachers just for having students enjoy the music and the lyrics. The music is reminiscent of the fifties and this should prove useful in studying that era.

In addition, the song can spur the studying of Ritchie Valens' short, yet meteorically successful life. The song and the movie can also motivate students' interest in learning Spanish, in learning about Chicanos, and in the study of moviemaking by Chicanos about Chicanos. In addition to examining the characters in the movie for their authenticity, teachers will want their students to examine the movie for its portrayal of the deep Hispanic family bonds and other Hispanic customs and traditions. What other movies by Luis Valdez about Chicanos, for example, are worthy of viewing in our classrooms? How does Valdez' depiction of Hispanics differ from their depiction by other moviemakers?

• The song "La Bamba" and the artist, Ritchie Valens, also provide a rich source of symbolism about Chicanos and other Hispanic Americans. "Para bailar La Bamba se necesita una poca de gracia," goes the song—and so it is that being Chicano in America requires a little bit of grace, i.e., musical, ideological and bilingual/bicultural grace. What a better way for teachers to explain the condition of Chicanos in the U.S. than with a song that blends American rock and roll music with the Spanish lyrics of a traditional Mexican wedding song. It might even be said that Ritchie Valens' La Bamba is somewhat of a Chicano anthem. La Bamba preceded the Chicano movement by only a year or so, but it described the Chicano dilemma in the U.S. better in many ways than the numerous scholarly articles about Chicanos that followed.

Through the song, La Bamba, Valens seemed to also be telling a predominantly English-speaking country: "I am Spanish-Speaking but still very American, I am just taking an American institution (rock and roll) and adding a Spanish flavor. I am Chicano and I am American, listen to my need to express myself in Spanish and also listen to my need to be American." Like Charles Dickens did in his time, Valens succeeded through his art in sending a social message, i.e., transforming the definition of being American to include also being Hispanic and "American." Most of the Chicano movement revolved around just that issue! (Readers are encouraged to read my previous article entitled "Chicano History Week, *El Renacimiento*, February 23/March 29, 1987.) Who says that you can't, for example, take a hot dog and make a burrito out of it by eating it with a tortilla instead of a traditional hot dog bun? La Bamba did this to rock and roll music.

Ritchie Valens, like Chicanos in this country have done, took something very Mexican and made it very American and vice-versa. Just as Chicanos take El Cinco de Mayo and the 16th of September, and hold them with as much regard as the Fourth of July, and just as Chicanos take the U.S. Constitution and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to be equally worthy of being honored, Ritchie Valens brought together something Mexican and something American. La Bamba through music seems to say that being of Mexican descent and being a U.S. citizen are equally acceptable and, yes, compatible. To a traditional Mexican song Ritchie Valens added rock and roll riffs and by doing so he took a Mexican artifact, added an American twist to it and created something new, something decisively Hispanic (Podhoretz, 1987)

To carry the symbolism further, just like Ritchie Valens fell in love with an Anglo-American named Donna, Chicanos in the U.S. have fallen in love with an Anglo-American institution called the U.S. Constitution. While Chicanos adhere to many of their Mexican traditions, they adhere even more strongly to the U.S. Constitution with more passion than many Anglos. Just like Ritchie Valens took a traditional Mexican song, La Bamba, and transformed it into something recognizably American, Chicanos have kept their Mexican culture, yet have become ideologically very American. Just like rock and roll music was the medium for La Bamba to be heard, the U.S. Constitution will also be the medium through which Chicanos will be heard in their efforts to achieve justice in the U.S.

Chicano adherence to the U.S. Constitution can be attested to by their willingness to die for this country if need be. Although Ritchie Valens died for his art and not while in service to his country, Mexican Americans have died in greater numbers for this country proportionally than most ethnic groups. Proof of Hispanic Americans' fierce loyalty to this country is the fact that as a group they can claim thirty-seven recipients of the medal of honor, proportionally more than any other ethnic minority in the U.S. Although we are ethnically of Mexican descent, we have more courage to fight and die for this country than most groups. Being ethnically different than the majority has not affected our patriotism for this country and it never will.

Finally, the movie La Bamba is also a portrayal of American values—that we can rise from poverty, become not the run-of-the-mill Chicano adolescent, he was gifted, he did succeed. It is this dream that we want to instill in all our children, especially if they come from the humble background that Valens did. We want to instill this dream with the understanding that America should be a country where one can be ethnically, racially, and linguistically different and still have the equal opportunity to succeed. Every person has God-given talents of their own, and in a country with equal opportunity we should be able to express our talents like Ritchie Valens did, to the fullest. Viva la Bamba!