

FRESH AIR, 7.15, 7.16.87
INTERVIEWS WITH LUIS AND DANIEL VALDEZ
FRESH AIR WITH TERRY GROSS

First interview:

In 1958 a Mexican-American teenager named Ritchie Valens had three songs on top of the Rock-and-Roll charts: "Come on Let's Go," "Donna" and "La Bamba." (Musical Excerpt) "La Bamba" was a popular Latin Folk song that Valens adapted to a Rock-and-Roll beat. Ritchie Valens grew up in various California migrant labor camps and poor neighborhoods near Los Angeles. His music brought him and his family out of poverty, but his career was short lived. After only eight months in the spotlight, Valens died in a plane crash, along with Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper. Valens was the first Chicano Rock-and-Roll star, after his death he remained a hero to many young Chicanos.

The life of Ritchie Valens is the subject of a new film called La Bamba. It stars newcomer Lou Diamond Phillips, and was written and directed by play-write Luis Valdez. Valdez is the founder of El Teatro Campusino and the creator of the play Zoot Suit, about Chicano teenagers in the 1940's. Zoot Suit starred Luis Valdez's younger brother Daniel. Daniel is the Associate Producer of La Bamba and first proposed doing this film fourteen years ago. I asked Luis, then Daniel about what the song "La Bamba" meant to them:

(Luis) "La Bamba" especially signalled a turn in Rock-and-Roll, and in a way, a turn in my life. I took that as a sign of hope and inspiration.

(Terry) Daniel, you are nine years younger than your brother. What was your life like when Ritchie Valens hits were on the radio and what kind of memories do you have of that period?

(Daniel) Well, I was ten years old when Ritchie died, and it was really a time for me when I kind of disappeared in to the radio, so to speak and got lost into the teenage world of Rock-and Roll. And there's a term that they used to refer to Ritchie Valens--"late, great Ritchie Valens." You know I always heard that on the radio, "Here's another hit from the late, great Ritchie Valens." Outside of the fact that he epitomized what the whole teenage image of that Rock-and-Roll era was about, you know there was a myth to Ritchie that stayed there and remains there.

(T) As part of your research for the movie you tracked down Ritchie Valens's family. How did you find them, was it hard to do?

(D) Yeah, it was very difficult, I mean it is a little like chasing a shadow. You know? And it wasn't until actually about 1982, late '82, that I ran into a series of articles

that were printed in that year, that basically covered the crash and stuff like that. And it was from that I was able to get somewhat of a family sketch. I found out that his name was Valenzuela, but no mention about the family, where they went what happened to them. I went back to Los Angeles at least with a name to try and track back. I knew that he had gone to ?????????? Jr. High because of stuff in the articles, but what about the people? What happened to the people? And it was in October, Halloween night of 1983 that I got a phone call from a friend of mine who was working the concession stand at our theatre in San Juan, who said, "You've got to come over here 'cause Ritchie Valens's brother is standing here." And I said, "Yeah sure." Right (sarcasm)? And so I went and I met Mario who is Ritchie Valens's younger brother. And it was from that that I found out the family lived sixteen miles away from where I lived.

(T) So they were right under your nose all the time.

(D) Exactly, exactly, it was amazing.

(T) What was Ritchie Valens's family's reaction to your desire to do a movie about Ritchie Valens?

(D) Well it was nothing new. They were very skeptical. At the time when I approached them we didn't talk about anything specific in terms of a movie or anything. I just basically told them that I felt it was important to document any kind of background on Ritchie that we could get. Because he was important to kids, he was certainly important to Chicanos, but little by little the wall of resistance had to be dealt with, and it took about a year and a half, just really to feel confident with one another.

(T) Bob who is the brother that really helped you find out what you needed to know in order to make the movie is portrayed in the movie as a pretty nasty, selfish, violent guy. He's the opposite of Ritchie Valens, Ritchie Valens is very nice, very respectful, very decent, and his brother is a petty thief, kind of an alcoholic who does drugs, abuses women, what did he think of his portrayal in the movie?

(L) Well he let us do that portrayal in the film. Its important to say, I think, that in spite of the fact that we had all these photographs and clippings that told the surface of Ritchie Valens's career and the details of his death, there was very little that was personal. What remained was an icon, what remained was a saint. That left Bob, Bob was the key. Bob opened up. I told him

"Look our problem is that we need to understand Ritchie as a human being. He has to be real." So he began to talk and he gave us not only an impression of Ritchie, but certainly an impression of them together as brothers. And an impression of his own role. He was not sparing in terms of treatment of himself, I think he was harsh. Almost too harsh really, about himself. In a way he was getting it all out. We took a long walk, to Pequonia ??? (His Jr. High School) many of the places where they'd played, and uh, some of them which are in the movie, these scenes are in the movie. His last run, you know, towards his mother's house when he hears of, uh, Ritchie's, uh, death on the radio. All of that ended with Bob, with tears streaming down his face, and saying he hadn't cried in thirty years. But that he was glad he had finally gotten these things out and that he told me.

(T) Let's talk about the casting of Ritchie Valens. Daniel you were initially supposed to play Ritchie Valens, but you were too old by the time the movie was actually made. The way the movie was actually made the actor who plays Ritchie Valens, doesn't do the singing, it's the group Los Lobos...

(D) Right.

(T) ...who, uh, performs all the music, so it's lip-synch by the actor. Was that your intention from the start to, uh, have the actor just do lip-synching or did you find, try to find someone who could sing as well as act.

(L) We tried. We arrived after a long process of auditioning we saw over three hundred young men in Los Angeles alone, another couple of hundred in Chicago, New York, finally crossed the "T" nationally, went over to Texas. What we were looking for was an actor/singer/musician. Which is an impossible combination actually. We would have discovered, rediscovered a Ritchie Valens if we found this kid. So we set up a chart, sort of a grid pattern and certain priorities on one side, certain priorities up the other side, and ended up by process of elimination deciding on an actor. We figured the most important thing is that this person had to be able to convey the humanity of Ritchie Valens. He had to have a goodness of spirit and yet a certain kind of ferocity...

(D) An innocence.

(L) Yes, an innocence. Consequently, we read whatever actors auditioned for Ritchie. We read them as Bob as well, you see, and vice versa. "Cause they had to be brothers and they had to have this interlocking relationship. And I

think Lou has done a fantastic job of not only communicating the spirit of Ritchie Valens, the goodness of heart, but also his ferocity on the stage.

(T) In part of the movie, Ritchie Valens has really made the American Dream, he has a suburban home, he has a new car, he has an attractive, white, blonde girlfriend, and hit records, and you don't begrudge him that, you don't condemn him for his assimilation or his prosperity. And I had a feeling a that few years ago maybe you might have.

(L) Oh, yeah. A few years ago, when it was a different time. You're talking about the 1960's in some ways. It was a period of ethnic self definition, you know, part of self determination. Ritchie was a product of the 50's, before the 60's, but he assumed that the dream was valid for him, too. I mean, he didn't put any obstacles before himself and say, "Oh, I can't have a blonde, blue-eyed girlfriend, or I can't be a rock-n-roll singer." He didn't put all those obstacles in front of himself. He went for it and he achieved it. And I think that's a tribute to him. He opened the door for a lot of hispanics who may not feel that they can participate fully. Daniel and I, through our work in Hollywood, are trying to open many doors. I mean, you look at us, and we look indian, you know, but we're Anglo-Hispanics. We speak English, you know, we've eaten hamburgers all of our lives and hot dogs and played baseball, I mean we're Americans, come on give us a break. That's what the story is. I think it's taken thirty years to look back and look at Ritchie Valens and see what his contributions really were.

(T) I want to thank you both for talking with us.

(L) It's been a pleasure.

(D) Thank you.

(T) Daniel and Luis Valdez talking about their film La Bamba, which opens on July 24th. Tomorrow, I'll talk more with Luis Valdez about his own migration from the California fields to Broadway and Hollywood. Here's the group Los Lobos with their version of "La Bamba." This is Fresh Air...

End of first interview.

Second interview.

My guest is playwright and director Luis Valdez. He's written and directed a new film about the life of Chicano rock-n-roll star Ritchie Valens. It's called La Bamba. Like Ritchie Valens, Valdez grew up in the migrant labor camps in California's San Fernando Valley. Valdez escaped from that life by writing and staging plays. He founded El Teatro Campusino to tour and perform plays in support of the United Farm Workers. Valdez is best known for his 1978 play, Zoot Suit, based on a real incident in 1942 when twenty-two Chicano gang members were wrongly accused of a murder. All of his work is aimed at dramatizing the Chicano experience within American culture. When I spoke with Luis Valdez, he told me how he fell in love with theater.

(Luis) I was like six years old and we were in this huge migrant labor camp in the west valley in California called Corkrin. And we were picking cotton. Cotton season ended and we couldn't leave the camp because the truck had broken down, my dad's truck, pick-up. And this is 1946, we're talking the Fall of 1946. Things were still scarce believe it or not. Brown paper bags were scarce. So one of the things that I did was fold my little bag very carefully for my lunch and take it home. One day after school, I go to get my bag and it's missing, in the cloak room. And the teacher saw me looking, the bus was waiting and she says, "Are you looking for your bag?" And I said, "Yes." And she says, "I have it, come with me." And she took me to this little back room and my bag was all shredded, cut up into little pieces and floating in this basement water. And I said, "What did you do? What did you do to my bag?!" And she said, "Look." And right next to it was a clay mold. It was a monkey's face molded in clay. Next to that was another mask, another mold, but with paper mache' on it. But what the mask was for was for a play. And so I tried out for a part and got the role. I was going to play a monkey, you know in the Christmas play, about Christmas in the jungle. I enjoyed it. The costume that they measured me for and eventually fitted me for was better than my own clothes. It was incredible. So, I was very joyous, all the preparations. I mean, maybe it's more elaborate in my mind than it was back then, but it seemed like Disneyland to me. So I was in the play, looking forward to it and then the week before, that week, the week we were going to do it, my dad got the truck fixed and we moved away.

(T) Oh.

(L) So I was never in the Christmas play. So in order to make up for that gap, that unfillable gap, I started staging plays at that age with my friends. We found an old house, we put up trees, I'd direct them. By the time I was seven, you know as soon as I could really write legibly, I

started putting together scripts. Theater was my obsession from them on, until this day. You understand it's been more than forty years now.

(T) So as a child you had put on plays for your friends and family to come to?

(L) Oh, yeah. My friends eventually in my grandfather's garage I opened up a little puppet theater. Puppets were much easier to manage than my friends, you know. And I could make them out of paper mache' and paint them, and stage shows. A cardboard box turned upside down became our stage, we had a little curtain. My older brother got involved, you know, he was my first producer in a way and he collected the makings at the door.

(T) But how old were you when you said to yourself, "When I grow up, I'm not going to be a migrant worker"?

(L) Well, that didn't take too long, you know. I was still a kid actually, working in the fields. There were all kinds of possibilities coming out of that, but it was clear to me that the way out was through education or through the use of, in my imagination.

(T) Had you been exposed to a lot of literature or any theater when you were growing up as a migrant worker?

(L) Yeah, one of the things that I did do is read a lot as a kid. You know this really, this is dated before television. We barely had radio. I mean, I go back to the days of "Straight Arrow" and "Bobby Benson" and "The Bee-Baa-Bee Writers" and "The Shadow." You know, all those old radio programs. I followed them avidly. I loved stories and read many of the classics, you know. I mean you know, Treasure Island, the whole shot, you know, and let my imagination just go with it. I always found out where the Library was in any particular small town, and also the movie house like everybody else, because movies were something else. The Pelage of George Pow, Destination: Moon, The Worlds Collide, The War of the Worlds all of that just used to flip me out.

(T) How did you get to college?

(L) I won a scholarship. I also went to college as a Physics and Mathematics major. I was, I love that field of human knowledge, you know. My older brother is an engineer. He designs computers in the Silicon Valley. We were both going to go into Science. At some point though, I decided to go into writing.

(T) So when you got out of college and you had studied literature and writing, why did you want to go back to where the migrant farm workers were, where you set up the El Teatro Campusino, working with Caesar Chavez and the migrant farm workers, the United Farm Workers Union?

(L) Well, I think conditions were so bad, alright, that even as a child it was obvious to me that something had to change. It was miserable. I even remember thinking as a child, "What am I doing out here, I'm a kid?" But there were long hours and the pay was very poor and the living conditions were miserable. I mean, there's a lot of stories that I could tell you, you know, that involve that whole life. Suffice it to say that I became aware that something was wrong and that justice was not being done. By the time, okay, that I got to college, through high school into college, I had a political consciousness which fit exactly in with the beginning of the 1960's. I joined what's essentially the Civil Rights Movement in 1959. As a matter of fact, you know, the death of Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper and Buddy Holly in February of 1959 marks the, I've just been thinking about this lately, marks the real turning point in my development because it's as if my youth was over. Do you know what I mean? I was no longer a teenager and it now time to think of other things. It was the most natural thing for me to do in 1965, is to go back to Delano, California, where I'd been born and to work with Caesar Chavez and the Union in an attempt to try to form some protection, an organization which would protect the farm workers.

(T) You were performing sketches and plays for a migrant farm workers, but you had a reputation that spread. I mean you got off Broadway awards and other theater awards, your reputation spread around the West Coast and to the East Coast, how did people find out about you?

(L) I think that it was because of the march in Sacramento in 1966, which was a phenomenal event. It still, for me the greatest case of theater that I've ever been involved in, theater in the world, you know, theater in reality. We marched up three hundred miles, up the spine of California, Highway 99, bearing our red flag with a Thunderbird Eagle eye, passing semi-trucks and, you know, thousands of cars everyday. In the evenings we'd settle in some little farm worker community, put up a flat bed truck, put up our banners, our backdrop and speeches would be given and the Teatro would perform every night, twenty-five nights in a row. The press came from all over the country. They took our pictures, they took everybody's pictures, we were filmed for the first time and people became aware of us. We were mentioned in Newsweek, and

out of that came an invitation, eventually, from other colleges and universities to go perform and that led to one morning when Pete Seager called me and invited us to attend the Newport Folk Festival in 1967, exactly twenty years ago, which we did. Out of that came another performance with the Senate Subcommittee in Agricultural Labor. We performed in New York, and out of that came the Obie.

(T) Now that you're doing work for movies and for the theater, do you feel that you're still able to maintain the kind of political and social involvement that you started with?

(L) Absolutely. I mean I think that there's a certain amount of natural evolution that takes place. I mean I lived my twenties and I was a typical person in their twenties. I was radical, I was curious, I was angry. I was an angry young man and enjoyed it. I got my political rocks off, you know, in that sense. I feel that all of us that were active in the 1960's have a responsibility not to let America settle on an image of the 60's that it was a period of flakes and kooks and weirdos. It was not. It was a period where the most basic chords in the American conscious were touched. And we cannot forget that. And yes, there is stuff that will fall away because it was silly, every generation does have it. The drug thing certainly has gone awry, you know. The sexual revolution has become something else, but the social values, okay, what we're standing for, that was important.

(T) Luis Valdez, thank you very much for talking with us.

(L) Thank you.

(T) Luis Valdez's new film La Bamba opens nationally on July 24th. This is Fresh Air.

End of second interview.

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