

Transcript of Interview with UFW Muralist, Carlos Almaraz – 1986

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MARGARITA NIETO: Was this when you were doing the "Pingos"?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No, this was after that. The "Pingos" were. . . No, actually it was before the "Pingos." The "Pingos" I did later when I returned to school to finish my master's degree. But what I was saying was that I met Gilbert Lujan in my mother's garage. He came around because he'd heard that I was doing some work. I had spoke with him on the phone about his magazine Con Safos. And although I didn't agree in principle with some of the ideas of the magazine it tended to be very local, it tended to be very macho-oriented, it tended to be, rather than literary, it kind of tended to be more like a comic book. At that time I was not into comic-book philosophy. I later became more interested in comic-book philosophy, down the road. But we started to discuss, we began our dialogue on what is a Chicano, and what is the Chicano movement, and why should I, Carlos Almaraz or I was then Charles Almaraz why should I get involved? Well, Gilbert is a very good spokesman for the movement because he believed in it totally. I've always been a cynic. I really feel that nothing will really change the situation, but I, at that time because of my brother's death, was willing to try to better the situation for myself and for Chicanos and for basically Third World people ultimately. But principally at the beginning it was mainly for my own sense of answering the "whys." I got involved with Con Safos only in a few illustrations that I offered them, and then I started to do a lot of reading and Chicano history and Mexican history, and to then get involved in some of the basic principles of the Mexican psychology, which was pre-Columbian thought, the conquest, the struggle between mestizo and the European culture, and started to really know more about myself as a Mexican. It finally led to my getting involved with murals, street murals, my first murals being the ones I did for Cesar Chavez. And I think I mentioned before that I was one of the first professional artists who had returned to the eastside to do murals, for free. I mean, there was no money at that time. There were no grants. It was simply what you could salvage, not salvage, but gather from donations around you, to do a mural.

MARGARITA NIETO: How did you meet Chavez? Was it through Gilbert?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: No. Gilbert in a sense was the kicking-off point. I started to realize that this movement, so-called movement, had a start, had started somewhere. That Gilbert in a sense was a prophet of a philosophy that had already had its beginning long before I returned to Los Angeles. As it turned out, its beginning, one of the beginning points was the Cesar Chavez movement in 1965, when he started to lead and to guide the farmworkers out of the fields and get them to demand better standards of living for themselves, and to raise the standard of living for people of that caliber. So this was back in '65. And from Gilbert, I decided to go to the San Joaquin Valley. At that time I did not intend to meet Cesar Chavez, but I intended to get closer to the source of the philosophy. Now this led me to, before Cesar, it led me to Luis Valdez. I happened to be in the San Joaquin Valley in San Juan Bautista by accident, and a family took me over to the theater to see one of the productions of Luis Valdez. And he was doing a, at that time he was doing two obras, two pieces of work. One was the beginning of the *Carpas of the Rasquachies* [The Lowly-Ed.] and then the other was a play concerning pre-Columbian music, philosophy, and some of the mysticism,

concerning pre-Columbian life, which intrigued me, because he had done, Luis Valdez had done his homework, knew what he was talking about, more than anyone I had met at that time, concerning pre-Columbian ideas. And he had put it into an art form that was, for his limitations concerning money and space, he had done a superb job on this little play that I had seen. After the play, I was able to meet Luis and found him to be totally unique. I had never met a person like this [before]. I had met one other person like him, but totally unique in that he was his own person. He was a very complete individual who knew exactly what he was all about and seemed to know and be able to lead other people to some of his dreams. I was very taken by him, very, very in awed by this man, who was maybe, you know, he's five-two or five-one, a tiny man. Brilliant mind. Tremendous vastness in his intelligence. I later found out he originally was a math major. He was really a mathematician.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, really. I didn't know that.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: That was his first love. And then he was also a gymnast. He used to do all that stuff. (chuckles) And this I found out only recently. And then I started to get to know him well enough to read some of his old plays, one of his first plays being *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, which was interesting. . .

MARGARITA NIETO: But did you approach him after the production?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, I did talk to him a little bit and all he could say to me at that time, and . . . I remember saying that I wanted to join the movement and he said, "What movement?" And I thought, "Here's the man who started some of the movement and he's asking me 'what movement'." But he really meant that, because he understood that everybody has their own movement, and his movement was theater. Everybody else's movement was what everybody else wanted to say their movement was. So I had to define what I meant movement. And we had a small but important talk. It was for me an important talk. And it was shortly after that meeting that I started to use my original name, Carlos, instead of Charles. So I returned back to L.A. very enamored with the theater, with the whole life, and with something very personal. I had grown up among rural people when I was a child. At least two years of my life was spent out in the country. Meeting Luis, and later meeting his family, was incredibly familiar. I felt very much at home, and I had a feeling that I knew them all before. So I later met his brother Danny, his sister Socoro, and many of the other members of the theater group. And I felt very, very much at home and wanted to join them. I returned later to meet Luis again and to show him my work and to discuss more of the ideas that I had already opened up and had been opening up through my first dialogues with Gilbert Lujan. And I found that. . . I ended up living at his house for about ten days. He actually, Luis took me right in and I slept on his couch, and I was able to get close to the source of much of the ideas of the sixties and seventies and even today. I was able to, you know, to really get close to the man himself.

MARGARITA NIETO: And how was it that you were, started doing murals for Cesar Chavez?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Well, from that dialogue with Luis, he said, "Who you should meet" and he said it most casually "is Cesar Chavez." And I said, "Oh really. How do you meet him?" He says, "Well, you have to go to. . ." what at that time was forty acres in Delano, which was their original land. Well, when I got to Delano, they had left; the farmworkers no longer used that as their

headquarters. They had moved to La Paz, which was this little tiny town I guess a berg outside of Bakersfield.

MARGARITA NIETO: So, in a sense, it was happenstance. You saw this theater group, you meet Valdez, and Valdez suggests that you meet Cesar Chavez.

CARLOS ALMARAZ: Casually suggested I should meet Cesar Chavez. So I said, "Well, that's good. I'll do that." Within 24 hours I was in front of Cesar Chavez. He's a hard man to know, hard man to get to meet. But I was astounded at myself for realizing that if you want something you have to go out and get it. You must. . . You do it. Or you don't. So within 24 hours. . . And the way that was managed is that I left San Juan Battista, I drove down to La Paz, first to Delano. He was no longer there. They told me where he would be, I made a phone call, was introduced to the editor of [El Malcriado], which was Venustiano Organ. I said I want to do volunteer work for the farmworkers, and since I had done work in journalism before, I would like to do it for the union. I understood they had a newspaper. He said, "Fine, come on down. We'll meet you." I did, I went down, he met me, he liked me, and he said, "We're having a meeting with Cesar right now concerning the 1972 convention that we're all going to be working on. Why don't you join us?" So I did. He led me into the big hall at the administration building in La Paz, and, as I say, within 24 hours I was in front of the man himself. And when it was time to speak on so-called decorations, they turned to me and I gave my announcement of what I had suggested to do, which is to paint a big banner, a la Diego Rivera, you know, some of the other Mexican painters, muralists. Well, Cesar loved the idea. And he said, "However, we're not going to be ready to talk about decorations till later." So I was a little insulted because he referred to my mural as decorations. So we left the meeting early. And I left it rather abruptly, because as we were walking down the path someone yelled out to me to, "Come back, come back." And I said, "Why?" He says, "Cesar wants to talk to you. He wants to talk now about the decorations." (laughs) So we went back and sure enough, he said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I want to do a big banner, very political, very like a big political cartoon, blown up, so that people can see. . ." We're talking about farmworkers who don't read, you know, they do read some Spanish but not a lot. I said, "Let's get a picture across to them of their own struggle." So Cesar loved that, and he said, "Great. What do you need." And I told him what I needed. He says, "Well, we don't have any money, so I don't know if we can do it." So he left it at that. Then about, I stayed with the farmworkers, worked on El Macriado for the next week or so, then Cesar came back to the office one day, and said, "Well, how much do you really need to do this banner?" And I told him I needed about \$300 and some paint. So he got me some of the money for the banner, and then I went out myself and got a volunteer donation for the paint. And then we started, with the help of Mark Brian, we painted an enormous 64- by 32-foot banner, political cartoon, on this big piece of canvas. They rolled it up and for the convention they rolled it out and hung it up on the wall, and it looked great, you know.

MARGARITA NIETO: Is it still in existence?

CARLOS ALMARAZ: I don't know. I assume it is, but it's probably in real bad condition, because it was done with acrylic paint, and acrylic paint becomes moldy, and canvas rolled up, even anywhere, can become pretty moldy. It was later shown, and it's astounding to me, because I had never done that piece for any kind of museum recognition or any of the so-called high-art recognition. But it was shown two years later at the Los Angeles Museum of Art, Wilshire Boulevard, at one of my shows.

