

Lalo Guerrero, 88, Songwriter of Mexican-American Life, Dies

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published: March 19, 2005

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif., March 18 (AP) - Eduardo (Lalo) Guerrero Jr., who for 60 years created songs in Spanish and English chronicling the Mexican-American experience, including music later used in the play "Zoot Suit," died here on Thursday. He was 88.

His death, at an assisted-living center, was announced by his son Mark Guerrero of Palm Springs.

Mr. Guerrero was named a national folk treasure by the Smithsonian Institution in 1980 and received the presidential Medal of the Arts from President Bill Clinton in 1997.

Lalo Guerrero was born in the poor Barrio Viejo neighborhood of Tucson on Christmas Eve 1916. He had no formal musical education, but his mother taught him guitar, and during periodic trips to Mexico, relatives inspired him to write songs.

After dropping out of high school during the Depression, Mr. Guerrero drifted to Los Angeles, where the arranger-producer Manuel Acuna saw him on a street, asked if he was a musician and had him in a recording studio the next day.

"It wasn't planned," he told The Associated Press last year. "I didn't have an agent. It just never occurred to me."

Mr. Guerrero went on to create more than 700 songs and sold millions of records in both Spanish and English in a variety of styles, including swing, protest songs, cha-chas and rock 'n' roll.

His Spanish hits included "Nunca Jamás" and "Canción Mexicana," which has been described as Mexico's unofficial national anthem.

He also wrote ballads in the Mexican corrido style that honored Robert F. Kennedy and the farmworkers' rights leader Cesar Chavez.

Mr. Guerrero was already a star in Mexico and the Southwest for his traditional songs when he crossed onto the mainstream charts in 1955 with a parody of "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" from a Walt Disney movie. He replaced Crockett with a Mexican called Pancho Sanchez.

There followed a string of hit parodies in both English and Spanish with names like "Pancho Claus," "Elvis Perez" and "Tacos for Two" (to the tune of "Cocktails for Two"). Some of the songs took satirical swipes at discrimination.

Mr. Guerrero also made children's albums featuring Las Ardillitas, a trio of squeaky-voiced squirrels, which became wildly popular in Mexico. He made the albums the same year that a song featuring Alvin and the Chipmunks came out in the United States. Alvin's creator sued, but a judge threw out the suit after Mr. Guerrero said he had thought up his characters first.

Some of Mr. Guerrero's boogie woogie-influenced songs were used in Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit," about a notorious 1942 riot in which servicemen attacked Mexican-American youths wearing the distinctive baggy clothing. The popularity of the play, which reached Broadway, and the 1981 movie reignited Mr. Guerrero's career.

Lalo Guerrero lived in the East Los Angeles area for many years and had a popular nightclub there. He later moved to Cathedral City, near Palm Springs.

His last work was recording three of his songs for an album by the guitarist Ry Cooder, called "Chavez Ravine," which is scheduled to be released this summer.

In addition to his son Mark, Mr. Guerrero is survived by his wife, Lidia; another son, Dan, of Los Angeles; a granddaughter; three sisters; and two brothers.