

## CHICANO FARM WORKERS' MOVEMENT

Jacquelin C. Peters

The San Joaquin Valley of California is a major agricultural center. Its abundant harvests are enjoyed by many Americans unaware of the substandard working and living conditions endured by migrant workers who gather the crops. The many undocumented immigrants from Mexico included in the ranks of the farmworkers refrained from complaining and risking arrest and deportation. The children of these farmworkers were caught in a situation in which they could not get an adequate education, if they went to school at all; they were destined to remain in a cycle of poverty which their parents had come to America to escape.

This situation prompted the campaign to organize the workers and the strike headed by Ceasar Chavez of the United Farmworkers of America in the 1960s. Americans were informed about the plight of these workers and were urged to boycott California produce until employers of migrant workers provided better living and working conditions. The beginning of the strike was depressing to the workers. Picketing families faced having even fewer resources to support themselves. Ramon "Chunky" Sanchez of the music group, Los Alacranes, related how he, his brother and a few other musicians brought their guitars with them to the picket lines one day and played old tunes to cheer up their fellow strikers. Seeing the rousing effect music had, they decided to bring their instruments every day, but they soon tired of playing the same songs. This led to their improvising lyrics about the boycott.

The Valdez Brothers — Luis and Daniel — co-founded El Teatro Campesino with Agustin Lira during the Great Delano Grape Strike in 1965. Together they led the artistic component of the farmworkers' movement, writing songs and plays about the boycott, and winning the Off Broadway "Obie" award for "creating a worker's theatre to demonstrate the politics of survival."

Lira, a featured artist at this year's Festival, was

born of migrant farmworkers in Torreon Coahuila, Mexico, spending his first years in Torreon, Juarez, Texas and New Mexico. By the time he was seven, his family had settled in the San Joaquin Valley. His early education took place on the migrant path, and formal musical training began in high school. After leaving El Teatro Campesino in 1969, Lira took an independent direction. He established four other theater groups before El Teatro de la Tierra, which he began in East Los Angeles and incorporated later in rural Fresno, California in 1974. Together with his group, Alma, Lira presents the story of the Chicano experience in song and narrative.

### CITATIONS AND FURTHER READINGS

Levy, Jack. 1975. *Ceasar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Ross, Fred. 1990. *Conquering the Lion*. Keene, CA: United Farmworkers of America.

### SUGGESTED LISTENING

Los Alacranes. *Picando*. Alacran Publishing 1989.

El Teatro Campesino. *Huelga En General! Songs of the United Farm Workers*. El Centro Campesino Cultural TC 1352.

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*Jacquelin Celeste Peters was an Arts Administration Fellow for the National Endowment for the Arts, and has served as an evaluator for NEA's Folk Arts and Expansion Arts programs. She is a consultant scholar for the D.C. Community Humanities Council, and compiled the premier edition of the "African American Folklorists Directory" for the Office of Folklife Programs.*

*As an independent radio producer she received grants from NEA and from National Public Radio's Satellite Program Development Fund to produce programs on popular African music.*