

# Un Homenaje a Américo Paredes

*An homage to Américo Paredes*

**Estevan César Azcona**

*They sing with deadly-serious faces, throwing out the words of the song like a challenge, tearing savagely with their stiff, callused fingers at the strings of the guitars.*

Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand*

For me, 5 May 1999 began as a day of triumph. On this day I completed my Masters report [*editor's note: on mariachi music performance by Chicanos and Mexicanos on this side of the border*]. Later that day, while having the report copied, I bumped into an old acquaintance who told me that Américo Paredes had died that morning. The joy with which I began the day, Cinco de Mayo of all days, suddenly diminished, being replaced by feelings of loss I am sure many felt upon hearing the news.

I came to the University of Texas at Austin in 1995 to study the music of Chicanos and Mexicanos in the United States. Very early on in my graduate career, I read *With His Pistol in His Hand* and *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero* as well as the excellent collection of his articles in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*. Most of this opus predates 1980, yet in the year 2000, its sheer weight and integrity still resonate to the student of Chicano/Mexicano culture. What I find in the work of Américo Paredes is the foundation of many current issues and debates around cultural production, performance practice, and native scholarship. As we wrestle today with the intersections of identity, community formation, resistance, public/popular culture, and performance, we find a great deal of recent research, particularly in cultural and subaltern studies, foreshadowed in the work of this visionary scholar.

Much of the weight attributed to Don Américo's work lies in

his rootedness with the people and culture of the border he wrote about. They are “his people” and his writing displays a conviction and imperative often lacking in academic work. Of course his own history as a poet, singer, and fiction writer intimately connects him with the expressive practices noted in his work. Yet as rigorous and astute as his scholarship is, it is also exceedingly accessible. He was able to link the world of the academy with the larger world where work has more accountability. His language is not dense or terse, but instead cuts to the chase and reveals the richness and complexity of life in Mexican America.

I did not know Don Américo well, but I was fortunate enough to meet him on many occasions, whether it was running into him as he visited staff and students at the Center for Mexican American Studies, or catching him during his Tuesday coffee sessions at the Cactus Cafe. It was always a treat to sit and share a word or two with him, “the dean of Mexican American scholars.” As director of the Mariachi Paredes de Tejastitlán, it was always my pleasure to tell him of the current status of the ensemble and the students involved. He relished in telling me of how the ensemble was named after him, although he always modestly insisted that it wasn't his idea. (In 1977 when the UT Mariachi was formed, the group was named by one of Dr. Paredes' students, Manuel Pen~a, and ethnomusicology professor Dr. Gerard Béhague, the Mariachi Paredes de Tejastitlán, in honor of Don Américo. The name was inspired by the greatest mariachi from Mexico, the Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.)

I also never had the pleasure of hearing Don Américo pick up his guitar and sing a verse or two, as he's done in so many stories I've heard by others. Yet, I have had the pleasure of playing for him and his family. Surrounded by family and friends, Américo and Amelia Paredes celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary with the sound of mariachi music. As much as everyone enjoyed the music, I believe the mariachis who played that day enjoyed it more, as we felt honored to play for Don Américo and his family. We still beam with excitement when we remember this day. These same mariachis performed without hesitation for the memorial service for Don Américo at UT to pay their respects.

Indeed, to those who knew or knew of Américo Paredes, there is a great feeling of loss, many reflections about what will be missed about him, and a great sense of how we all benefited from knowing

him and his work. Many graduate students today, like myself, did not have the opportunity of working closely with Dr. Paredes. Yet although his counsel and experience are no longer available to us, with resounding consistency, he continues to provide a guiding hand as an example of the power of the pen and the integrity and responsibility of the scholar.

Like the *corridistas* of old, who sing with “deadly-serious faces,” Dr. Paredes approached his work with a similar urgency. Without a doubt, he has shown that intellectual work is an important and deadly serious matter, and that it is not our privilege to take this work lightly. Just as the *corridistas* “threw out the words of the songs like a challenge,” so does the legacy of Américo Paredes continue to challenge us to make our work resonate with the lives and struggles of the people about whom we write.

c/s

