



family among strangers

THE CUMBIA is blasting from the jukebox at the Silver Lake Lounge, a gay Latino dive on Sunset. "*Te quisiera enseñar a amarme* [I would love to teach you how to love me]." A couple of gay *cholitas* are about to pull out switchblades over a love triangle: "*Orale, ése*, but he's a creep, man, he's so T.J." I tune into the Juan Gabriel ballad; he's the gay Elvis of Mexico. His *ranchera* "Noa Noa" takes me back. To a past life? "*Fui Latino, no es algo romántico, es una verdad. Y pienso que tú fuiste gringo, también*," I hear myself explaining to a certain skeptical Salvadoran I'd drop my research in a sec just to drive around the block with. ("I was once Latino. No, it's not something romantic, it's true. And I think that you were Anglo once, too.")

BY DOUG SADOWNICK

crossing
the borders
in gay L.A.



CHUCK STALLARD

Transcending? Gay Latinos join hands with L.A. gay godfather Morris Kight at his McCadden Place Collection during Viva's first-year anniversary *celebración*.

Hector R., who volunteers at Cara a Cara Latino AIDS Agency, is rambling away at me in Spanish about his appreciation for white men. I nod my head, distracted by the Coronas in my brain and the Mexican-American tough guy in a motorcycle jacket making a sturdy pass at a passive pretty boy by the bar. I know the dude; he's the strutting husband of the sweet woman who works at a bakery in Silver Lake, my favorite *panadería*. He sees me, and we both grin with the giddy shame that makes being gay not so much about sex but surprise, especially at the joints like this — the Plaza, Woody's Score, Jack's Placita, Basco's, etc. — smack dab in the *corazón* of *machismo* L.A.

I'm here with Roland Palencia and Mike Moreno — two new friends. They're having the kind of class-conscious tiff Central Americans and Mexican-Americans start family feuds over. Roland's built and stocky, with slicked-back, black Eisenhower-era waves.

Roland would look the part of his nickname, "Super Latino," if it weren't for the Izods and tweeds he sports, even as he chats decadently about the kind of outre sex he'd like to have. He's always coming from endless meetings at his job as supervisor in a Glendale corporation, and can't be bothered to carry "the jeans ripped just the right way" in his Nissan.

Playing the role of "anti-imperialist," Roland now queries Mike on his Americanism, his baseball fetish and his "excessive chauvinism at being from central New Mexico," a hop-skip-and-a-jump from pueblo ruins and dirty bookstores in Albuquerque. Roland brings up the forgotten history that Northern New Mexico was also fired by Reyes López Tijarena and Cesar Chávez's La Raza Unida party. "Don't you dare try and make me into a Chicano!" Mike hollers.

From the bar, where I'm ordering Perrier for everyone but me, I check out Mike's taut

body, nervous Stan Laurel grin, and black, wiry hair cut like a Marine's. He looks braced for a street brawl or a sudden pass. But pierce that star-spangled surface and you get a different dude, a Mike who's so precociously vulnerable that he has to use his voice box like a PA system to cover up.

Mike throws his kidlike arm around me and says that he's been excavating spiritually (and literally, during a recent trip home to Belen, New Mexico) for mystical artifacts that'll shed light on his Indian past. He's using the "mental stuff" he got from est to put his Native American side over his Cortés side. When he talks about being vaguely Apache and distantly Moorish-Jewish, his eyes start to tear, as if history were a monster arising inside him, inciting him to claim the future that's been denied him and his people. Have I heard of the Hopis? he asks.

Trumpets from Linda Ronstadt's *Canciones de Mi Padre* get all the habitues hooting. I overhear another conversation, this time about AIDS: "Pues te llevamos al doctor, we're insured." Meanwhile, it seems to rile Roland that Mike, who is much darker and less middle class than he, doesn't try to speak the mother tongue. "You are so colonized, *mija*," Roland jests. But Mike isn't amused. "I hate that term, Roland," he says, jackhammering his finger into the Guatemalan's chest, rejecting Roland's feminization of nouns as well as the "Latino" label. "It leaves out the Indian in me; it leaves out that the Spaniards massacred my people, that we are all double-colonized."

Roland is the son of an intellectual Guatemala City bourgeois who gave up his leather-bound books and his servants to fight alongside the leftist guerrillas in the hills. Roland's father was promptly murdered by the government; he and his family just as promptly became refugees. After years of Scarlett O'Hara resolve, Roland evolved into a confident aspirant to the American middle class, the de facto *papa* of his unassimilated family, and an ardent spokesperson for the newly emerging Latino gay community. In 1983 he served as president of Gay & Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU); now he's the brains behind Qué Viva!, a Latino gay and lesbian arts movement.

But 976-Mike (his nickname) wonders if Roland's intense "Latino" pride and attachment to family doesn't get in the way of "figuring out his gay thing." Sure, Roland is a leader, but Mike wants to know where the steady *novio* is? Roland lives soberly with his *mamacita*, a fact that the sassy and Anglicized Mike doesn't play down. Mike would take any Mexican pop — or even Donna Summer — over this "dull *ranchera* beat." He hates *cumbias*; Roland grew up with them.

Why does it matter? These comrades are also nascent artists, and these issues go to the heart of a new movement of which they and six others are the principal architects. Robert Cyclona laughs at them and with them, overhearing their tiff. He has a right. He's a veteran performance artist from the Asco group, a

executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, calls "the rage-guilt tango." He was out to draw blood.

True, I had criticized "minorities" for not showing up at what I considered to be a crucial event for gay people, the weeklong AIDS vigil at County-USC Medical Center in January, sponsored by the AIDS



LAURA AGUILAR

An exception to the rule: "*Nos sentimos orgullosos de nuestra familia*" ("We are proud of our family"). Mario Hernández (right, behind couch), who works at Milagros AIDS Project in East L.A., poses in a family portrait with his lover, Arturo Olivas (left, behind couch).

parodic-romantic art collective that helped lay down the bridge between the '70s Latino and Anglo avant-gardes. Cyclona had made a name for himself by donning glamorous women's clothes and sashaying up and down Whittier Blvd. to attract the hottest *cholos*. *Orale, Cyclona. Que Linda!*

Now Cyclona is building a second career as a performer. He says he couldn't do it without the help of friends like Roland and Mike, Betty Flores, Roberto

Coalition to Unleash Power, ACT UP. I couldn't understand why they stayed home. His letter responded to my frustration as follows: "Your inquiry as to where the people of color were should've been turned inward. My question to you is: Where have you been? Not in our ranks, for sure. Don't you know that for a person of color to try to participate in an AIDS organization at a substantial level is comparable or greater than fighting the disease itself?" And later on: "Instead

Betty Flores

Roland Palencia

Aleida Rodríguez

Roberto Ochoa-Schutz

Liz Lopez

Milagros Valdez

Robert Cyclona

Mike Moreno

Roland Palencia: "Our goal is the total restructuring and solidifying of the Latino gay psyche. We need to get strong, yes, but without doing it as separatists. We want to be a fortress and a bridge simultaneously."

Ochoa-Schutz, Liz Lopez, Milagros Valdez and Aleida Rodríguez, the moving forces behind Viva.

"Our goal is the total restructuring and solidifying of the Latino gay psyche," explains Roland, who is jokingly referred to as *caudillo*, or messiah. There are those who'd love to believe that joke. Roland sometimes quakes at the task in store for gay Latinos. "We need to get strong, yes, but without doing it as separatists. We want to be a fortress and a bridge simultaneously."

Roland's fervor inspires a group of lonely guys nursing Buds to collect around him. I'm prepared for the bulbous door man to break up this party at any moment. But Roland has been a community leader for too long; you just don't throw past GLLU presidents out of Latino bars. "We need to create our own Don Bachardys and Christopher Isherwoods and Holly Nears, and to share them with all gays," he exhorts starved ears who have never heard of these gay cultural icons. "We want to create an artistic territory that will make artists into instigators."

Mike and I brace ourselves for collective cries of "*Viva la raza!*" But in a sec, Roland is gone. "Doguito," he calls out to me from the crowded dance floor, "pay no attention to my God-awful rhetoric. *Baila conmigo.*" I protest that I don't dance the *cumbia*. Mike's cackle explodes in the sea of nicotine, sweaty biceps and pencil-thin mustaches as Roland drags me off, pulling me by the ear, until we insinuate ourselves to center stage. "You got it," he cries out, leading, goosing me to loosen me up. "Just don't be so queeny."

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD ABOUT Roland Palencia was when I learned that he was going around town saying that I was a racist. He had sent me a raging, two-paged, single-spaced letter that I had never received, criticizing the ethnocentrism underlying various articles I had written for the *Weekly*. Roland had made sure to send copies of the letter to lesbian and gay leaders all over town.

Eventually we met, and danced what Torie Osborn



family

Are we having fun yet? Members from *Lesbianas Unidas*, the backbone of GLLU, take a break from organizing during Viva gala. Second from right is GLLU president Lydia Otero. Last week, GLLU received \$30,000 from the county to set up its firsts AIDS services. Otero: "We're in for one huge transition, but it's time we took care of our own."



TED SOQUI

political — no mention of AIDS — it at least was deeply communal. (Phill Wilson, a black gay leader, did leave in a huff, saying that a black arts group would never get away with such AIDS denial).

Roland and I had made our friendship into an experiment, and that night the project blossomed. We became tight. Pals. What he calls *comadres* — girlfriends. I took this opportunity to meet his friends, speak his language, and to use the excuse of being a journalist to ask offensive questions. In doing so, I tried to join a *familia* to which I have, all my life, felt drawn. The results were intoxicating. I think my heart actually leapt when politico Arturo Olivas whispered in my ear at the sexually charged gathering, "Well, *mija*! You're making quite a hit in the Latino community." And then I smacked him when he added: "Bean Queen."

I must have been flirting fiendishly. But why not? It seemed so easy to cross the great cultural divide using

one's raging, if unconsummated, libido. We may not agree on how to *be* homosexual, but we can all agree that we *are* homosexual, right? I passionately believed then that gays of any color had a head start in transcending our corn-fed American hatred of the "other" by making use of Plato's first step toward Absolute Love: the unfathomable body.

As if you hadn't guessed, the results of this "experiment" blew up — all over the place. It was a mess.

IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT VIVA'S FIRST-year *celebración* was called "Transcend"; the *función* took place at Morris Kight's Hollywood home/gallery, the McCadden Place Collection. Kight is the godfather of the Gay Liberation Front in L.A., and he hosted a heterogenous crowd during this *fiesta*. That stunned certain members of the gay Latino political wing who often presume, quite rightly, that their

strength is in their fortifications, that anger keeps them healthy.

No common denominator unified the gay Latino artists. Franko's collages reminded me of the *El Nuevo Fuego* mural art that adorned the Victor Clothing Building downtown. Mike Moreno's *santeros* were created with sentimentalized found objects such as snapshots, memorabilia and garbage (usually all from the same person, as in the case of the *Eddie West* piece). They're sexualized combinations of Pre-Columbian ritual art and minimalism. Robert Gutiérrez's phallic paintings raucously used the metaphor of "cum" as graffiti to comment angrily on sexual totalitarianism.

Laura Aguilar, who once hated the color of her skin, had photographically captured the depth of tone in the L.A. *lesbiana Latina* scene, making her both chronicler and purveyor of that group's dynamism. Betty Flores read poetry in Spanish that spoke of her continual recoiling from Tijuana demons. Aleida Rodríguez, who returned to her native Havana to rediscover her past and become lovers with a childhood friend, recited poetry about being a hunter of myths. Milagros Valdez and Conrad C. performed a section from Roberto Ochoa-Schutz's play *Santa Unión*, an unprecedented achievement about growing up gay in the *barrio*. Cyclona, in all his/her stoic folly, waltzed about, waving arms like Isadora Duncan, to a roaring throng and a few juicy sneers from lesbians down on drag.

The work Viva's producing may not all be distinguished — especially when seen in relation to the more political and sophisticated influence the Latino avant-garde and visual art world has exercised in L.A. and Tijuana since the '60s. But art is not Viva's only concern. "We have been unable to build a strong coalition in the Latino community with politics," says Milagros Valdez. "So the idea is to use culture, to make the artist into a cultural worker and to create pride about being gay and Latino through expression." **PAGE 18 ►**

family.

ONCE, IN LATE APRIL, I WOKE UP IN the middle of one night, alone. My boyfriend, Tim Miller, was toiling day and night to build a new, alternative art space, called Highways, in collaboration with Linda Frye Burnham, founder of *High Performance* magazine.

I was disturbed. Around this time several conflicts within the gay community threatened to escalate; and they all seemed to symbolize problems Viva and I were having with each other. The most heated controversy centered around a little-known association called the Gay and Lesbian Police Advisory Task Force. It serves as a liaison between the L.A. Police Department and the gay community especially to help curtail LAPD harassment of gays. Mario Marich ran for the position as co-chair, but Task Force co-chair Marshal Phillips and his colleague Ivy Bottini, president of the influential Stonewall Democratic Club, intervened. By all accounts, they stacked the meeting, and kept the inexperienced but energized newcomer out. Marich and Eliseo Martinez, of AIDS Project Los Angeles, formed their own group of Anglos and Latinos, called Association for Better Law Enforcement, or ABLE.

In a May article published in *The News*, a gay newspaper, Phillips was asked what part racism may have played in his action? He blew up, attacking Marich's main supporter, who is white: "He always liked Latin men . . . little Mario just happens to be Hispanic." Then a newsletter published by the Stonewall Democratic Club called Marich's group "miscreants" and "sore losers." A war was averted, but barely. Just last week the monied and mainstream AIDS Project Los Angeles was one of the slew of "white" organizations to assail the Task Force.



Cyclona in the old days with avant-gardists Gronk and Patssi Valdez. Valdez designed the Cyclona "look." Cyclona: "Gronk had the nerve to call me a drag queen, but I'm really an art statement."

At the Crest Coffee Shop a few weeks later, Eliseo Martinez told me that he believed the support shown to him by "white groups" proved that the "day has come when the dinosaurs roll over and give way to new blood." But I was feeling less optimistic — my own relations to Viva had worsened. I had, admittedly, broken my journalistic rule of thumb: it was one thing to become involved with your subjects, it was another to inflict them on your boyfriend. Tim had opened up Highways. The first event was a Cinco de Mayo marathon put on by Border Arts Workshop. I had insisted that Viva come to the event, convinced their feistiness would be inspirational. After the Tijuana artists presented pieces about border metaphors without touching on gender, Viva assailed the absence. "Do you plan to ignore the 300,000 gay Latinos in L.A.?" Roland asked artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. "If I had to choose being gay or Latino," Mike Moreno added,

"I'd choose being gay." Argued Marcus Kuiland-Nazario: "Your culture makes us into women."

In the weeks that followed, members of Viva made Highways into a new home, planning future events, taking tickets, doing anything that was needed.

But the party ended in June when Highways sponsored a lesbian/gay performance art festival. Roland and his colleagues were offended that while there was a black artist, there were no Latino artists performing at that festival. How was that possible? True, no openly gay Latino performance artist had emerged in L.A., but what about the two small literary readings? Weren't they rather white? True, writer Samir Hachem was Lebanese. But what about Latinos?

Highways acknowledged the oversight and offered Viva a day of its own. "What if no one came to our reading?" Roland wondered. "We do not want to be treated like an afterthought." Viva preferred to be added to existing programs. Highways did add the separate reading with gay Latinos; it was a great success. Meanwhile, several Viva poets were added to the lesbian reading.

Roland, Mike, Milagros and Aleida — along with Viva supporters — arrived at Highways for the reading. After a week of fights with me, Roland and Mike looked exhausted and nervous. Viva was introduced to the audience — and then Milagros Valdez assailed Highways' multicultural commitment in June. Then Aleida Rodríguez read a poem about a difficult relationship that had just ended. Her former girlfriend broke out into sobs in the audience. A Latina walked out in the middle of Aleida's poem, ridiculing Roland: "How could you let that jealous woman walk all over Viva in the name of racism?"

How dare Roland project his anger about what he loved to call the pervasive "gay apartheid" to me just because I was white? And then I caught myself asking a question I had always considered racist, this time without bothering to censor myself: "Why were those people so goddamn angry?"

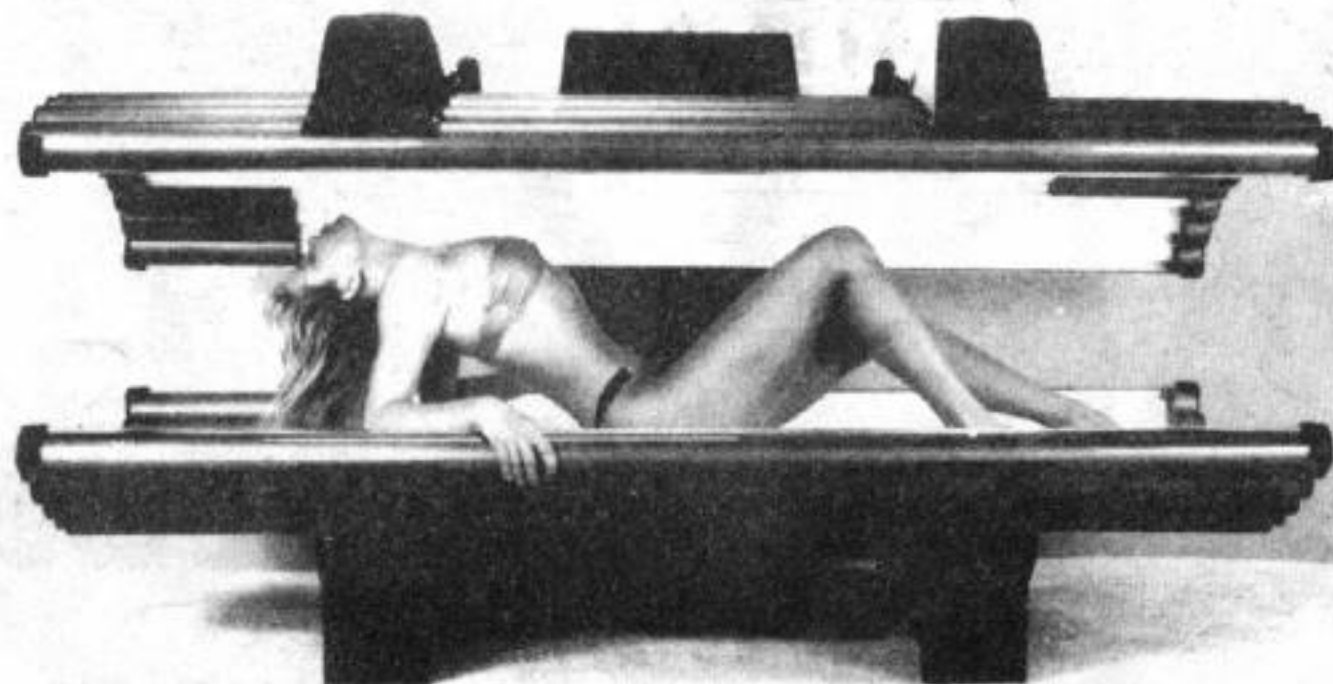


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family

I DON'T PRETEND TO understand what happened, or to downplay my own resentment at being resented, but I am still prepared to see it all from Roland's side, too. It seems that this reaction against perceived racism, while sometimes self-destructive, is necessary. How many times has *Frontiers*, the most popular gay newspaper in L.A., neglected to cover Viva events — even after every major paper in town had written about them?

"Rome wasn't built in a day," Roland intoned ironically when he called the next day, and we tried to laugh. "Have we taken on too much, Doguito?" he asked, exhausted. "You are the first white friend I've had, and now I feel as if we're losing each other."

I have no answers. In the last few weeks, I've talked a lot about the Highways debacle and have received more suggestions than justifications. "What if," Mario Marich asked, "we finally confronted the fact that we are a people without borders? You go to Mexico City or Paris and you *can* find family among strangers. Why can't we come to terms with what is indigenous to us, which is our common sexual bond? You and Roland have to keep at it; there's no choice. Remember this: we live with racism everyday. For you, this is only a beginning."



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beginning."

Sounds too utopian? Maybe. But we're living in a time of crisis, and maybe there's no alternative but to draft ambitious challenges. These days I spend my time visiting white and black friends in hospitals, and as I meet more Latinos, I find myself visiting them there, too. The other side of utopia is this hell that we're living in. How can we take it? My life has gotten so morbid that, as I stand in the crowded Silver Lake Lounge and look into the faces of the men and women I have come to know, I wonder how long we have. Sometimes, when I realize that there's still a tremendous amount of work to do, I despair that the hour is late, and in this short time before sleep and play we will have failed.

But then Roland teaches me *cumbia* twirls as Mike winks in the background. And then I think of the Gay Pride Parade. Santa Monica Boulevard will be packed with sticky bodies huddled in segregated cliques. Maybe somewhere in the crowd there'll be those of any color who fantasize about the possible bridge whose trestles haven't yet been soldered. A little hope? Maybe in between the beer puke and the outdated disco music, people will tune in to these beating hearts, little rumbling sounds, the heartening clang of the cranes and the reminder of the watery abyss below. And then, maybe, yes, gays and lesbians in East L.A. and Watts who hadn't heard yet about the gay parade, because they don't get the gay papers, will sense those tremors in their own languages and idioms. Maybe this year the message will come through loud and clear to those ready to hear it, generated from a few hearts eager for an echo and prepared for noisy banging, clanging: *Viva la gay raza . . . la raza . . .* 