

On the Go, Ridin' Low

BY ODESSA PEGUS

I'm running down a rainy San Francisco street to quickly get to the church where my friend, Roberto Hernandez, is celebrating his daughter's *quinceañera*. But then something stops me dead in my tracks. What a sight! A parade of gorgeous, brightly painted sleek looking cars is gliding slowly and majestically down the narrow rain-filled street. Look at that bright yellow one, I think, awestruck.

It didn't occur to me then, that night three years ago, that those elegant cars belonged to a lowrider car club. I do remember that what I saw changed my mood from anxiety about arriving late to one of sheer joy. Dancing my way into the reception hall I soon found out that those cars belonged to Northern California car clubs *Nuestro Estilo* and *The Dukes*. There were 15 cars for *quince años*, generously provided to transport the ladies to the ceremony and later cruise them around the *barrio de la Misión*. As a resident of Oakland, I wondered if there was anything like that across the bay.

Bring the story forward three years, it's 1999 and I wonder no more. The car that I am in is turning heads and stopping others dead in their tracks. I am cruising down Oakland's 73rd Avenue and International Boulevard in a lowlung masterpiece. Lounging luxuriously on smooth white leather, Jose Suarez, his girlfriend and I cruise slowly down the boulevard in his '84 supersonic blue Monte Carlo. Jose pops in a soul CD and starts to work his show. Switchmaster Jose clicks into hydro-action, cranking his *ranfla* up one minute and down the next. Cruisin' slow to the sexy soul music, abruptly changing to the staccato beat of Ice Cube's rap. Bouncing and hopping, rising and dropping reminded me of my first roller coaster ride. *Jose, tu ranfla esta chingon*. Jose lets me loose and feeling the power I start to get switch happy with that hydro-action. I call it "car dancing" and it makes me feel excited, flying high. Check me out, this African American lady is stylin' in my black t-shirt and hat



"RED CHILE RIDER"

trimmed with the gold letters of the Oakland car club—Sabor Latino.

On a mild, sunny Saturday afternoon I waited expectantly to interview members of Sabor Latino. A white 4Runner and a green Chevy Blazer pulled up with four passengers, and we headed to the Round Table Pizza. I exchanged greetings with Ernesto Aguirre, President and Tony Alejandre, Sergeant-at-Arms of Sabor Latino. I then met 15 year old Danny Suarez and 10 year old Tony Alejandro Jr., President and Vice President of the Sabor Latino Bike Club Chapter.

Homies since junior high school, Ernesto and Tony were always into cars and lowriding. During the '70's and '80's they hung out together in East Oakland, and did some gang-bangin' until they finally married two sisters, became brother-in-laws, had some kids and got their careers going. As kids they loved cars and talked about forming a club. Tony had a '64 Chevy Impala and Ernesto had a '63 Chevy Impala Super Sport. In August, 1997 they said, "You know, let's go ahead and make our own club." They met with some other friends and Sabor Latino was born. Today 15 members form the Oakland club, and they've just recently begun a second chapter in Hayward.

Ernesto Aguirre was a natural leader and became President by popular consent. A soft spoken, articulate, easygoing guy, it's easy to see why Ernesto was chosen. A single father of three, born in East L.A., raised in Oakland, and a lover of cars, he attended Fremont High, but

then "things didn't get too good," so he finished his studies at the Street Academy Continuation School. One evening while at Highland Hospital, Ernesto saw some paramedics bring in a gunshot victim. "That's when I figured it was time to quit the gangs. I just got a little tired of it and decided to start doing something else."

Today with two years of college and three years of training as an EMT (Emergency Medical Technician), Ernesto is an Oakland Paramedic. For eight years he has cruised the community in his paramedic posture. "It's exciting, but sometimes scary because we're the first to respond to a scene that may not be secure when someone is shot or beat up." When asked about his two lives, Ernesto replied, "I wish it wasn't, but it's definitely two separate worlds. The police see me in a certain way if I'm out on the street working as a paramedic. They treat me almost as one of their own. When I'm lowriding, it's a totally different world because that's where I'm most comfortable and at ease, because it's something I'm familiar with."

I couldn't resist asking, "Do you cruise in your ambulance?" The Medicine Man (his nickname tattooed on his upper arm) responded, "When we're not on a call I cruise the same sections that I would in my lowrider car and I play the same music. A lot of the time I see guys from the club cruising out

We're all Zapatistas. You too.

If you believe human beings have the right to food, shelter, work, health, education, and those things that are essential for living with dignity, you too, reader, are a Zapatista.

BY MERCEDES ROMERO

The indigenous people's struggle in Chiapas is a struggle for dignity and survival. It is the cry of millions of us who think there is still hope for humankind. It is the fight of those of us who want a better world, a just world, where children don't die of curable diseases, where all of us have a roof over our heads, education,

The federal government has changed its pieces but not its strategy. The low-intensity war continues and the state is becoming more and more militarized. To date, there are over 60,000 soldiers occupying the state and this has provoked the displacement of more than 20,000 indigenous people in the conflict zone who have fled their communities due to the

Acteal massacre, and implementation of the already-signed San Andres Accords. The government is not saying yes or no. It's simply not responding.

The EZLN continues making an effort to bring peace to Chiapas and to the rest of Mexico. In November 1998, it met in San Cristobal de la Casas with more than 2,000 representa-



Zapatista Protest, San Cristobal de las Casas, 1997. PHOTO BY ALFONSO LOPEZ CONCHA

work, health, and respect for our customs and traditions. Is that too much to ask?

The Mexican and U.S. governments are responsible for the genocide that has been introduced as a solution in Chiapas. The Mexican government supported by the U.S. government is one of the most lethal, well-armed, and well-trained. Hundreds of Mexican troops are being trained in the so-called "School of the Assassins" School of the Americas in Georgia. Mexico receives millions of dollars in military aid each year, and aid has increased 500% since 1994. U.S. interest in the Chiapas conflict is linked closely to the economic interests of the multinational corporations that want to exploit the large petroleum and uranium reserves and countless other natural resources in the region. Indians demanding autonomy hinders their plans.

More than a year after the Acteal massacre in which 45 indigenous people, mostly women and children, died at the hands of paramilitary groups associated with the state government, the overall situation in the state is worsening every day.

Women carrying bricks to build an altar for the dead, 1997. PHOTO BY GLORIA MALDONADO

terror sowed by soldiers, private "security guards," and paramilitary groups. Meanwhile, President Zedillo continues to renege on his promise to carry out the San Andres Accords.

The fact that the Zapatista uprising has attracted great sympathy worldwide bothers the government enormously. The international anger and demands, and the mobilization of civil society all over the world, are bad publicity for a system trying to sell the image of a peaceful Mexico on the road to economic recovery. Shielding itself with its foreign policy of non-intervention in other countries, it rejects international criticism, especially regarding the human rights situation. (Isn't this characteristic of dictatorial and repressive regimes?) It attacks foreigners who work or collaborate with human rights organizations in Mexico, deporting those who construct schools, for example.

The dialogue between the federal government and the EZLN has come to a standstill. The Zapatistas demand a minimum of five conditions to return to the negotiating table, among them the removal of federal troops from the conflict zone, clarification of the

tives from Mexican civil society. A result of this meeting was the launching of a worldwide summons to carry out "International Day of the Excluded of the World" and the International Plebiscite for the recognition of indigenous rights and an end to the war of extermination (for which the vote of all Mexicans and descendants of Mexicans over 12 years of age is being solicited). Mexican society and the Mexicans who live outside Mexico, together with people from many other countries, have responded to this call by organizing themselves in diverse ways, by forming brigades on the five continents to share the Zapatista struggle and participate in this democratic exercise.

WHAT DO WE WANT?

Democracy, freedom, and justice in a world where many worlds fit.

For more information, or if you want to help, call:

- Colectivo Apoyo Latinoamericano, 415-674-1859
- Comit  en Apoyo de Chiapas, 510-654-9587
- Comit  Emiliano Zapata, 510-594-4302
- Pe a del Sur, 415-550-1101
- Casa Bonampak, 415-642-4079



MI "RANFLA"

there. I cruise up next to them. I say, 'Hey what's happenin!' I start yelling out the window, slowing down. Of course when there's an emergency I gotta fly!" On the go by day, ridin' low by night. That's Ernesto "Medicine Man" Aguirre.

Club members take time out from work to socialize. Supremes Car Club hosted a family picnic for several car clubs from Sacramento, Tracy, San Francisco and Modesto who came to enjoy music, food and friendship with other car enthusiasts. My thoughts returned to my first amazing encounter with these cars as I looked over the 100-plus cars, trucks and bicycles that turned out for the picnic at Martin Luther King Jr. Park in Oakland on a cool, crisp cloudy day. Sabor Latino, Nuestro Estilo, Aztec Devotion, USO and other car clubs participated.

The gathering gave the full flavor, *el sabor*, of the car club and the low rider. Though the members are all men, the wives, girlfriends and kids attend meetings, special events and shows. Most of the women just fit in and are very protective of the cars. They support their men by helping clean and get the cars ready for show. The kids who are too young to drive have their own Bike Club and the men help them build lowrider bikes.

There were plenty of wives, girlfriends and kids at the gathering. Ages ranged from the teens to the forties. I gained new insight into the role of women from one wife who said that by allowing her husband to fully involve himself in his sport it kept him closer to the home because it gave him no time to stray. Another young woman described herself as an active member of a car club with her own *ranfla*.

It was cool meeting Kita Lealao, founder of USO, and learning some history of lowriding. What a surprise to hear that back in the '40's there were Blacks and Mexicans who started lowriding and by the '80's and '90's it opened up to different races.

Strawberry and his Street Team, from radio station Wild 94.9, showed up bringing their pure insanity into

the mix. They added fun and laughter to the birthday celebration for Juan Ruano, founder of Supremes, and did a live on air interview on the spot. Food was plentiful and included a very tasty *carne asada*. But the best treat, the one that had me licking my lips and fingers, was the Mexican cake *con tres leches*, a rich, moist, *pastel delicioso* made by Juan Ruano's bakery.

The *vatos* cruised around the parking lot showing off their *firme* rides and talked about future events like the car show in Fresno and the Alliance. The Alliance will be composed of several different clubs of Northern Calif. coming together to form an organization called West Coast Custom Vehicle Association. Their main target will be to help their own communities, especially those with youth crimes and gangs. They plan to use their own money to provide programs for the youngsters such as bike building to give them alternatives to violence. All the car clubs present pledged their support. I saw many people of different ages, colors, nationalities

and ethnic backgrounds, yet I kept hearing a common theme—"coming together, and doing a unity thing."

Sabor Latino is aware that there are some problems that plague the lowriding community. They also realize there are many who support them. The Oakland Police Department is supportive and even has a lowrider car painted by Tony Alejandro.

These lowriders see their hard work as "moving art." Proud of their beautiful murals and meticulous paint jobs, they enjoy competing with other car clubs and have won trophies in every competition entered. They work long hard hours on their cars, trying to achieve perfection. They are passionate about every detail, and perfection is expensive. They take real pride in their lowriding lifestyle and stress that it's part of their heritage. They want the public to know that they are taking the lead as positive role models for their children.



ERNESTO AGUIRRE, PRESIDENT, SABOR LATINO AND PARAMEDIC



SABOR LATINO BIKE CLUB BY THE BAY



SABOR LATINO LOWRIDER CAR CLUB MEMBERS



Low Riders

LATINO VERTICAL FILE

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Celebración del Cinco de Mayo!



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