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Oldies but Goodies- The 2nd Time Around

Thursday, March 11, 2004
6:00PM to 12:00AM

The finest Chicano style Oldies but Goodies, heard coast to coast and around the World only on KCLAFM.com, continue to be the most listened to on the World Wide Web, thanks to listeners like you!

This week's guest is Ruben Molina, author of "The Old Barrio Guide to Lowrider Music". Ruben will be spotlighting his new project, and says he has a surprise for all of us...especially Los Veteranos de Viet Nam....check us out!

Frankie Firme brings it back & keeps it alive like nobody else can, this & every Thursday at 6:00pm, L.A. Time, only on www.KCLAFM.com ! Tell somebody!

At: www.KCLAFM.com (Internet Radio) Aztlan

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Ollin

Thursday, March 11, 2004
9:00PM to 2:00AM

Come out and see Ollin at The Joint which has one of the most bizarre rooms in L.A.-red velvet cave-like ceiling.....

They will be performing songs from their forthcoming album which is being produced by John Avila of Oingo Boingo fame... Playing styles ranging from punk and cumbia to jarocho and rockabilly....

At: **The Joint**

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Franco Brothers
y Su Orquesta Actualidad



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Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire

New photographic exhibits at Self-Help Graphics reveal truth about Mexico's Indigenous people

By James Pringle | Web Published 3.5.2004

Let L.A. Latinos know about your events

Centuries of government oppression and the resulting struggles for basic human rights have taken an unfathomable toll on Mexico's indigenous population. The truth, however, about the depths of this suffering and the accurate historical accounts of a people who once ruled this region have often gone untold. While life continues to be anything but easy for the descendants of a once powerful and respected people, nothing has been able to diminish their enduring spirit. And it is this strong will and a life steeped in tradition that allows them to dream of a day when they will once again flourish under their native sun.

Photographer Wesley Billingslea has spent much of the last three years immersed in the rich culture and daily lives of these magnificent people, while also searching for the truth. His resulting work is represented in two unique traveling art exhibitions – Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire and The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – that are currently on display at Self-Help Graphics & Art's Galeria Otra Vez, 3802 Cesar Chavez Avenue, Los Angeles, California.



Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire is a collaborative effort between Wesley and the descendants of a people better known to most of the world as the Aztecs. At its heart, the exhibit features his inspirational black and white portraits and documentary-style photographs, many of which vividly depict how tradition plays a significant role in the lives of today's Mexihcah. Combined with handmade artifacts and the poignant text of Maestro Sergio Ocelocoatl Ramirez – a trusted teacher and himself a descendant of Mexico's earliest inhabitants – the exhibit helps reveal the uncensored history of the Mexihcah and the truth about their modern-day fight for freedom.



In June of 2003, generations of unhappiness and hopelessness boiled over for the many indigenous communities of Oaxaca, Mexico. No longer willing to be considered second-class citizens by their government, the people united for a common-cause rally as The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca. Thousands of people, their voices uniting as one, publicly demanded solutions to healthcare, housing, employment and education. But most of all they requested respect and a long overdue recognition of their rights. Wesley was in Oaxaca several weeks later for a follow-up protest. The drama that gripped the region during that period was captured in this exhibit's stunning photographs.

Franco Brothers

y Su Orquesta Actualidad

I recently had an opportunity to sit down with Wesley to discuss the exhibits and -- most importantly -- what motivates him in this journey to reveal the truth about Mexico's indigenous people.

Q. Self Help Graphics & Art is a world-renowned Latino visual arts center. You must be thrilled your new work debuted at such a prestigious gallery?

W. Actually, I am a bit stunned. I never imagined we would start out at a community-oriented gallery such as Self-Help Graphics & Art. I could not be more excited about this opportunity to potentially inform and help educate the local community, especially children.

Q. What is your greatest hope for these exhibits?

W. My greatest hope is that people will leave behind any preconceived notions they have about the Mexico's indigenous population and learn the truth about these magnificent people.

Q. Why the Mexihcah and The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca? What got you so interested in capturing their life-stories and their daily struggles on film?

W. My basic beliefs and values are such that we are all created equal and part of something much larger from a spiritual standpoint. I also have a great thirst for history and the truth. The little that I previously knew about these people fascinated and intrigued me because it seemed so little was known about them. I also felt like they were proud and beautiful people with a completely separate culture, which is very much still intact today.

advances in architecture, civil engineering, ecology, education, mathematics and technology – just to name a few – have had a profound impact on the modern world.

Q. You say you'd like to raise awareness about the indigenous people of Mexico. How will that help change their lives dramatically enough to make a difference?

W. Their primary objective is to educate people about their true history and who they are today. Additionally, they would like to change the educational system to accurately reflect that history and, in turn, receive the long overdue recognition they deserve from their government.

Q. What are their immediate and long-range goals?

W. They are trying to help educators better understand their true history, which would then be accurately reflected in the classroom.

The Mexihcah are also currently involved in legal actions against the Mexican government for renegeing on an accord that was jointly signed in 1994, called the Agreement of Sn. Andres Larrianzar. They want the government to acknowledge the commitment they made to this document and to Indigenous people.

As simply as I can state it, the Agreement of Sn. Andres Larrianzar affirms that the government agrees to protect all indigenous people in Mexico. Specifically, that means to protect their right to work and be educated and to provide a good quality of life. It was also agreed that their traditional lands would be protected. Many of these lands are today owned and occupied by the government, which is drawing off many of the natural resources that are found there. The Mexihcah have repeatedly tried to sue, but they are simply ignored.

As for the Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, they are literally trying to survive at this moment. Those things we often take for granted - like water, healthcare and better opportunities for their children - they have to fight for on a daily basis.

Q. What would cause a very successful manager working in the Silicon Valley to retire at the age of 43?

W. The intrinsic desire to do something more meaningful and interesting with my life, combined with my love for photography.

Q. What made you so passionate about the art of photography?

W. Photography is a rewarding combination of art, personal relationships and beliefs as well as technical proficiency. When I look through the lens, I usually feel an immediate connection with the other person. It is truly a moment of beauty for me. For a brief moment, nothing exists except the truth and me. My camera becomes an extension of me.

Q. Is it true that one image can take upwards to three days to develop? What makes this process so complex?

W. When you develop your own images, there are numerous variables that determine the final print. Much depends upon what you visualized or preconceived the final print to look like. There is also a creative process that takes place in the darkroom that can be both frustrating and rewarding. I personally find it exhilarating.

Q. In the age of digital photography, why are you still shooting film and why black and white?

W. I think both digital and color images can be interesting and beautiful. However, black and white images can evoke an emotion and convey a feeling like no other image. I can feel the moment that was captured and portrayed in each image I take. Black and white can be a powerful medium that lends itself to be shared with people as participants. But snapping an image with the camera is only part of a photographer's artistic vision. With black and white, I have the ability to greatly influence my own artistic vision through the printing process. This allows me to attempt to further portray what I was feeling at that specific moment.

Q. Who and what is WesleyImages? What is your mission?

W. Our goal at WesleyImages is to enable specific indigenous cultures the ability to voice their own truth and history. It is our hope to offer the public a more focused vision of who these people are through the use of art and photographs, exhibitions, documentary films, audio interviews, lectures and

Q. What is your overall goal for these projects?

W. Initially, my goal was very simple and much smaller in scale. I really just wanted to offer great black and white photos with simple stories accompanying the images. But the Mexihcah project suddenly took off like a rocket, and then the Apache project began to move out of no where and, finally, the Indigenous Council of Oaxaca fell right into my lap. I quickly realized that something much bigger was happening. Everything just fell neatly into place. I actually had to take a step back from everything to give some thought to what the real purpose, issues and goals were of all the work. I realized that while each project appeared to be different on the surface, if I looked more closely, they were all very similar; inaccurate histories, racism, poverty, bleak futures and challenges with their respective governments.

Each of these projects became very wide and deep in their potential scope. So the opportunities to accurately portray these people suddenly grew dramatically in a very short period of time. And after years of trying to build relationships in order to work closely with the people, I had access and acceptance.

Today, our goal is very simple: tell a very big story through many different means. And we do this in conjunction with the very people we are discussing. Hence, their words, their stories and their art.

Q. Did the Mexihcah accept you with open arms when you first entered their lives?

W. No. Not at first. Like every relationship, it was a process of getting to know one another and building trust. I believe it is fair to say that most Indigenous people I have met had an initial distrust for outsiders. Given the fact that my own family is Native American, and I had sponsorship within the Mexihcah, it made it far easier to begin friendships. I can tell you that I count many people in Mexico as my friends today because of these great experiences we have shared.

Q. The Mexihcah are what most of us have come to know as the Aztecs. How much of that ancient culture do the Mexihcah embrace to this day and how important is tradition to them?

W. As a non-Mexihcah, this is a difficult question to answer. But I will attempt to do so. From what I have witnessed, there are many, many Mexihcah who try their best to uphold many of the old traditions while trying to balance and integrate the modern world into lives. Many express their ancient traditions by speaking Nahuatl and participating in Danza ceremonies.

Q. You've spent considerable time in Mexico in recent years, which should give you a very good perspective on the country's indigenous people. How would you best describe how their lives differ from that of middle-income Americans?

W. They struggle for survival on a daily basis, not only financially but also because of an enormous prejudice. Until now, they have had so few opportunities to build a great future.

Q. What are the most serious problems they face today?

W. Financial, prejudice and recognition from the government.

Q. Why has the Mexican government turned its back on the Mexihcah and the people of Oaxaca?

W. Because of ethnic superiority and control by the Europeans, even though they are in the minority of the population, much like in South Africa. Mexican law is unique to America in that they cannot even mention an Indigenous group by name in their constitution. If they were to do so, then they would also legally acknowledge their rights and the past wrongs that were perpetrated against them. The government has a strong policy of not paying restitution to any of their original inhabitants.

Q. Do you believe Hollywood's history of depicting Native Americans in a not so flattering light has caused people to have less empathy for tribes like the Mexihcah?

W. Yes. Hollywood along with our own educational system and textbooks are simply inaccurate.

Q. What are some of the major misconceptions related to the Mexihcah?

W. Those who were the conquerors rewrote the history we believe to be true today. In other words, the Spaniards reinvented and rewrote history; accusing the Mexihcah of committing felonies to justify their actions. Some of these untruths have included polygamy, human sacrifice, cannibalism, imperialism, slavery and sexism.

At the same time, some of the Mexihcahs' most stunning achievements, which helped create one of the most civilized and developed cultures of its time, have failed to be adequately recognized. These

educational materials. It is our strong belief that the camera can be a powerful tool against racism, poverty and injustice.

We are currently focused on projects that are emotionally deep and wide. These are stories that have often gone unheard and are compelling.

WesleyImages is a small group of individuals that have seemingly come together for a variety of their own personal reasons. Each person possesses unique qualities and skill sets that, when combined, compliment the entire group and, therefore, contributes to our overall mission.

Q. By this time next year, you will be well into an extended stay in Mexico. What is your motivation for pulling up well-established roots?

W. That's a great question. Again, our hope and overall objective is to accurately tell the stories of Mexico's indigenous population. Initially, most of my images have been portraits. The focus moving forward will be to offer a deeper and more personal insight into their lives. We like to call it "A Day in their Life." This will require me to spend very long periods of time with numerous families. Therefore, the best way to achieve this is to live in Mexico full-time. I expect you will see a tremendous amount of documentary-style images from these experiences.

Mexihcah: Keepers of the Fire and The Indigenous Council of Oaxaca exhibits run through March 10, 2004 at Self-Help Graphics and Art. To learn more about these exhibits and for information on some of Wesley's other humanitarian projects, visit www.wesleyimages.com.

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