

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

**RICH DIETMAN:** The first Midwest Canto Al Pueblo enters its final day today. And this morning on Spectrum, we present some highlights of this week's activities of the canto or song to the people. The canto is a festival of Hispanic visual, literary, and performed art and is being held in St. Paul. It has brought together poets, playwrights, musicians, dancers, and painters from around the country. During the next hour, we will hear from some of those artists as they talk about their work and what it means to them both as Hispanics and Americans.

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

The idea of Canto Al Pueblo is relatively new. The first one was held in 1977 in Milwaukee. One of its organizers was Dr. Arnold C. Vento. Vento is director of the Center for Mexican-American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He is also a critic of Mexican-American literature and a documentary filmmaker. Vento was in St. Paul this week to attend part of the Midwest canto. It was there that he was interviewed by our Nancy Fushan.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Let me start by asking you how you viewed the development of Cantos across the country over the last three years.

**ARNOLD VENTO:** Well, that's a difficult question. I think that if we were to generalize, we can say that the canto is still in the developmental stage. It's very much like life itself. It's in the formative stages right now. It's a child. But we are seeing it grow in leaps and bounds. And we have great expectations for the canto in the future.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** In what ways?

**ARNOLD VENTO:** Well, it's only been in existence, to begin with, two years. It had its development in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1977-- summer of '77. It was done largely through the coordinating efforts of Dr. Ricardo Sanchez, Tigre Perez, who was also in Milwaukee, and myself. And I think that's where we really saw a new gathering of artists both in the literary world and in the artistic world come together.

For example, the Western artists had an opportunity to exchange ideas with the Midwestern artists. And that happened in Milwaukee. And I think for the first time, art came into play. Previously, the Flor y Cantos or conferences for Chicanos had been limited largely to literary kinds of things. And now, art is playing a fairly big role.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** What is it about visual arts that seems to be such a good tie for the American-Hispanic community?

**ARNOLD**

**VENTO:**

Well, if you're talking about muralism, which I think is the first thing that one notices in many of the barrios-- Chicago is a great example of that. Los Angeles, New York City, and now Milwaukee has a number of murals and Corpus Christi. Everywhere the canto plays, there are various murals that go up. Well, this is a public art and public art has a message. It is not art for art's sake. Rather, it has an underlying social messages, significance, and some political overtones as well.

So that is muralism. The colors are very rich. It's more in the tradition of Diego Rivera, Siqueiros, O'Gorman from Mexico. The great muralists of the world came from Mexico, as you know. However, the Chicano art is a little different from Mexican art. But that's getting into another question. There are other forms of visual arts-- filmmaking. We're just now getting into filmmaking.

We have some films that have been produced lately that are showing some promise. Although they really have not come out with roots, shall we say, for Chicanos. Although I've seen a lot of proposals nationally on this. And they still have not come up with that. But I think that's another area that we're looking at. Communications is certainly the most effective tool to project an image or to project a message. And I think we're going to be taking advantage of this in the future.

**NANCY**

**FUSHAN:**

Are some of the concerns centered now on the particular message that is being sent across? I mean, is that where some of the concerns of the canto will be?

**ARNOLD**

**VENTO:**

Well, the canto, first of all, is concerned with many things. I should go into the structure of the canto. We're going through a period of some change. The canto that's being held here in St. Paul, for example, is a regional canto. It is not a national canto. The cantos that we've had in Milwaukee and Corpus Christi were national cantos. And this is where over hundred of the best literary and artistic people were invited from different parts of the United States.

Here, I think the concentration is more local. It's more community. And of course, the canto has always had that. It's always community-based. And I look at it as an attempt for an opportunity for a neighborhood to revive its soul through, shall we say the spirit of art and of literature.

**NANCY**

**FUSHAN:**

Can you do that on a national level?

**ARNOLD**

**VENTO:**

Well, on a national level, it's more difficult because in essence, what happens is that you have a large conference of the cream of the crop, so to speak. And so I find it very difficult to do both. So I think in the future, we're looking at a professional association of writers and artists that will hold their annual convention, which will be very professional.

The usual conventions that one presents papers and has workshops, seminars, forums, and so on. And then in addition to that, also have the local community-based festivals, which would be something like what's happening here.

**NANCY**

**FUSHAN:**

Is that a vision that is shared by many of the people at the national level?

**ARNOLD VENTO:** Well, I think that most people are in agreement with that kind of thing. For example, in the association, we're looking at having our conventions abroad. For example, Western Germany, Holland, Italy, or France. And I think that in the literary world, certainly in prose fiction, the novel, the literature that is now being produced by Chicano novelists is sufficiently good to compete internationally now.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Is there a concern though, let's say among the local community organizers, that by splitting up like that, you may get very academic in the--

**ARNOLD VENTO:** So we're not really splitting. I think it's additional. We're really talking about having both. First and foremost, of course, it's a locally based community festivals, which I think we're moving towards a state cantos now rather than regional. Every state has an opportunity to put on a Canto Al Pueblo. This will be the only opportunity for Chicanos to celebrate a day in the year that deals with them directly in terms of their American experience within the borders of the United States.

All the other holidays that are being celebrated by Chicanos are really Mexican holidays that deal with Mexico, say September and Cinco de Mayo. But Chicanos do not have a day in which they celebrate their own experiences, their own liberation or whatever. So this will be an opportunity for them to do that.

**RICH DIETMAN:** Dr. Arnold Vento, director of the Center for Mexican-American studies at the University of Texas at Austin and a national organizer of cantos. He was speaking with Nancy Fushan.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[SPANISH SINGING]

Nephtali De Leon is a poet and author from San Antonio, Texas. He grew up in a family that often worked the cotton fields. His mother also worked as a cleaning lady and often borrowed books from the libraries of her employers. It was in this way that De Leon first got a sense for literature. De Leon writes for both children and adults. He too is in town this week for the canto and talked about his life and work with reporter Tom Meersman.

**NEPHTALI DE LEON:** Lately, I'm turning more and more into playwriting along with my other creations simply because drama, the stage, the live actor and actress, can communicate the immediate urgency of our situation, of our vital search for our survival. And basically, that's what I'm turning more and more toward. And I'm trying to do it in a manner that gives us enough slack to not go crazy.

The realities that I'm depicting are really harsh, very brutal. And our experiences are. We're going through an incredible odyssey as a people, as a Chicano Latino nation, which is written in blood. And we need to come out of that barbarism, out of that sadness, that incredible despair that has been the lot of our history. But in order for us to do that, we need to be able to face it directly and not ignore it, not go around it, but rather confront it and deal with it in the most humane possible way.

And therefore what I'm doing, I'm presenting these realities in a humoristic fashion. I look at it this way. If we are able to retain our sense of humor, we can laugh at ourselves, however painful it may be. Then we can keep our sanity. Then we can keep our wits and move forward. Keep going. Go ahead.

**TOM MEERSMAN:** I was wondering if you could give an example from your work or a scene or something that might illustrate what you're talking about.

**NEPHTALI DE LEON:** Sure. For instance, in many of our Chicano plays, something that's almost traditional now is the apparition of a virgin, La Virgen de Guadalupe. Because we communicate with her, she communicates with us, and religion being such a strong item in our life. In my most recent play titled *Tequila Mockingbird*, playing with words also-- but in my most recent play, La Virgen de Guadalupe does make an apparition. She does appear.

And as soon as the patrols, the state troopers who are nearby-- as soon as they see the image of this sacred lady, bright-- you know, brilliant because she's heavenly. They're having fireworks and that she must be a communist and she must be the leader of all this rabble rousers. She's actually the sacred lady. She's the virgin, the mother of God. And yet they see her in her great splendor. They think it's Chicanos being communists and doing fireworks.

And they're hot because these people are hot. Let's get out of here. And we got arrested lady. I'm saying, look, this means so much to us. And yet you want to take the most sacred part of us. It's a parody. It's a parable. In this particular play, the whole action starts at a great manufacturer of cereal breakfast. Because justice is blind, it does occur that two border patrols come into-- it's like a raid. They're wearing dark glasses because they're blind.

And the first person they get hold of is the owner of the company who has alcohol breath. Say, this must be a Mexican. That's for sure. I can tell already. I can smell him. And the other guy is named Springs. And he's always jumping up and down. Boom, boom, like a spring, because he is from the Department of Human Resortes. Resortes is our Spanish word for springs. So he's from the Department of Human Springs-- resources and human resources. So I make all kinds of games and plays with words like that.

Anyway, so they deport the owner and his assistant to Mexico for six weeks of a sun-filled paid vacation in Mexico. And they go through all kinds of trips. When they come back, they look like Mexicans. They're so sunburned. They're so tattered and ragged. So what happens? The police immediately pounce on them again. Hey, you must be from Mexico. We must get you out of here. And he's a great multi-millionaire, the guy. They thought he was a Mexican because he had alcohol in his breath. And that type of trip.

I do this. I do this repeatedly in different manners and ways to show that there are many stereotypes on both sides. And I want us to be able to destroy and laugh at-- by laughing at, first of all, our old stereotypes on both sides because we are both right and we are both wrong. We must learn to find our points of commonness and not look at our disparities so much.

**TOM MEERSMAN:** That description that you just gave. Was that from one play that you've written?

**NEPHTALI DE LEON:** That's from one of the scenes. That's my most recent play, *Tequila Mockingbird*. It's a comedy in three acts. It should be coming out within one or two months. It's already in the typesetters and they're taking care of it. I have published a total of eight books to this point, five of them for university level and three of them for children. Two of my children's books were adopted by the State Board of Education of California for bilingual/bicultural use.

One of them is being made into a film right now in Los Angeles by a Walt Disney artist doing the animation. It is titled *I Will Catch The Sun*. It's about the impossible dream of a child, which is-- I'm saying we all have impossible dreams to catch the sun. You don't want to do it. It's too high. It's too hot. How can you do that? But actually, it's a symbol of unfulfilled potential. And the child in a very ingenious way does catch the sun and shows everyone that it's not crazy to have giant dreams.

All children, listen to me, if your minds are fancy free. Listen to the story about a little boy very much like you and me. And sure enough, he had a little sister who often made things right. I'm telling it straight, Mister. She was something like a light. He played with tops. She played with kites. Or with the same toy, they would play. But something wonderful one day, as a dream came in the night. Or was it?

Could it be that little kids like you and me can see through clouds and darkness in the night, the beauty and the wonder bright? And from that moment on, Raul, that was his name, would have to ridicule and shame, become a little boy of fame. His name is known throughout the land, in every school like yours and mine. Though he was taunted, ridiculed, and mimed as a loquito quite out of his mind.

I will. I will. I want to catch the sun, Raul would tell himself and friends. While all the kids, they left and cheered. Boy, that sun catcher is weird. But whether Quetzalcoatl, the name of the Sun God, or maybe still the little frog or something deep within his mind. Whatever happened, we remember still. Raul had caught the sun. All children, listen to me, if your minds are fancy free. Listen to the story about a little boy very much like you and me.

His name is known far and wide for catch the sun, he did. So please, don't ever, ever hide your most fantastic dreams. For is it? Could it be that little kids like you and me can see through clouds and darkness in the night to make our dreams come true to life? And all of my stories have definitely in very overt but subtle political base-- and the type of politics is neither Marxist nor Communist, nothing of that sort. But rather a very human approach to communal survival, to getting along with each other.

It's like the old concept that they used to ask, what is the community? And the answer was a community is being different together. We have forgotten that concept. We need to return to it. Otherwise, we'll all sink. La tierra is limitada. Everything is limited. And we have a great need to learn how to share that. It's not easy, but not impossible either.

**TOM** So it sounds like as much of your writing is for-- well, you're writing is for everybody.

**MEERSMAN:**

**NEPHTALI DE** It's for everybody.

**LEON:**

**TOM** For Chicano youngsters or Chicano theater.

**MEERSMAN:**

**NEPHTALI DE** No. Whereas I do certainly address myself mostly to Chicanos because we have not had enough of our history, of our background, or our present discuss and dialogue about-- I create from our disparate worlds and from our various and different experiences. I synthesize it into such a manner that we become a fluid projection of a people, as opposed to what has often been said that we are fragmented people. There's no fragmentation in us.

On the contrary, we have had so many experiences that it has taken us a little while-- yes --to recognize that, simply because we have been exposed to one thing, that we do not necessarily have to become that thing. But rather learn from it and enrich our own Chicano-Latino background with it so that we can retain our individuality to in turn enrich our nation, enrich America, for we lost such great potentials when we became a melting pot. We just became a blah.

And therefore, all the richness of cultures, of peoples, of languages, is in danger of being eradicated. But it will not be so. I mean, people have already come into their own-- all people has realized that, yes, the minute you limit growth, you're hurting yourself. You're hurting the nation.

**TOM  
MEERSMAN:**

Do you have a real different way of writing for children than you do writing plays presumably for all ages?

**NEPHTALI DE  
LEON:**

I would say so. Yes. If only because for children, you must have a very simple story. Simple in terms of vocabulary. Simple in terms of not too many complex-- either happenings or peoples or what have you. So you don't bombard the mind to the degree that the child gets bored or turned off or that kind of thing. So it must be very light, beautiful, happy, catchy story. I do that on one level with all my children's stories.

But then within the story, I create levels within levels within levels of stories. So my finished product is finally very complex, but apparently simple little story. But within the lines, there are more stories that enlarge and give greater scope to the concept so that my stories are able to be enjoyed, first of all, by the children. Because if they are for children, I meant them for them. But then they're also written for adults.

I guess by the way of comparison, I can only think right now of Saint-Exupéry *Le Petit Prince*-- stories of that nature that have on the surface of superficiality. Very cute little stories. But a little child and an airplane falls down. And he goes to help. And the pilot and him have a good relationship in terms of communication and that kind of thing. And my stories are the same way. Some of my titles are things like Tamales. Tamales is a great sculptor, one of Los Tres Grandes.

In Mexico, we have this concept of the three great artists, the three great ones. In my story, the three great ones are Tamales, Menudo, and Nopalitos. All foods. Three foods within our culture. Nopalitos means cactus. He's a great artist, great painter. And he says that the most fantastic media for great art is the color green. Menudo. Menudo, that's a food like a thick soup made of the cow stomach. It's red color.

So Menudo says, you're crazy, man. The greatest media of communicating great transcending art is the little red color. And then Tamales, who is a sculptor-- you're both crazy, man. You don't even know what you're talking about. The greatest media of communication upon this Earth of great significant art is in the round. It must be sculptures. And all he did day and night was nothing but great magnificent sculptures of Tamales. Great beautiful things. So good where you could even sink your teeth into them. And it goes on like that.

I base everything I do upon ourselves, upon our culture, without ignoring the fact that we must go beyond parochialism, beyond our own natural regionalism that we're all prey to, I suppose. If we're not exposed enough to our other cultures, our other peoples, as well as everything around us-- for too long, we have been held in such cubicles. I feel like we're all imprisoned sometimes. There's very few means of our own communication.

If it's not Anglo and white, then it doesn't go. We are about a totally different thing, but not in opposition to what is already there. But rather, let us grow so that we can enrich ourselves together. I think that's the important part. All our art and all our literature, Chicano-Latino has-- first of all, for its main objective, it's a tool, a weapon of liberation. That's what it means for us.

It's a movement, art, a movement poetry, which does not mean that if it's a movement, it's not good or it's not valid. Or if you want to be Chicano and you want to be a Latin writer, you better have a few [SPANISH] or a few raised fists or that type of thing. That had its place and it's still very meaningful. It can still have its place. There are no ticky ticky boxes. In terms of our saying to our other artists, hey, if you don't create this way, then you're not a Latino artist. You're not a Chicano.

Everybody is a Chicano and Latino artist who has that type of experience. And we are not about to tell anybody what they can write and what they cannot write or what shape it should take or what direction, whether it should be political or apolitical. What we do say is, let us make ourselves very responsible and very aesthetic in our projections. Let them be marvelous and beautiful that people will come to them naturally. Let us not force down anybody's throat anything because then, we will have very many problems.

This poem talks about Atomic Veronica. Berry, the atomic woman. Caderas de salsa or she has hips of salsa. That's very prominent part of the anatomy. So this is why I emphasize on it and all the rhythm the movement of Latino-Chicano music. So I thought I expressed it this way.

[SPEAKING SPANISH]

[SPANISH SINGING]

**RICH DIETMAN:** Chicano poet and author, Nephtali De Leon. He was in St. Paul earlier this week to take part in the Canto Al Pueblo. He was interviewed by MPR's Tom Meersman.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Playwrights like Nephtali De Leon prepare works for the Chicano stage. Groups like Artists Contemporaneos perform them. Now a year old, the four-member acting company plays at universities and Chicano communities in the Chicago area. Appearing at the canto is Gabriel Sanchez, the group's founder. He told Nancy Fushan that rather than perform street theater or improvisational works, Artists Contemporaneos is attempting full-fledged productions.

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** We have had the opportunity to work with directors from Mexico. Jose [? Ferascuni, ?] he worked with us last year for some time. And we staged a version of Beckett's *Endgame*, which is a very classical play. It's a beautiful play. And so we're trying to expand into drama. And we're trying to work with sonography and all the technical aspects of the theater so that after we reach a point, we can then try to incorporate other manifestations of contemporary art.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** When you do a play like *Endgame*, how is your production different from maybe standard productions of *Endgame*?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** One major difference in our production of *Endgame* is that-- when I read *Endgame*, I said to myself that this was not as it being classified most of the time, theater of the absurd. To us, we all saw it as a very realistic play. And therefore, our director, we were very lucky. He took us in that direction. So therefore, we also had some criticism from the Latino community. They could not very well relate to Beckett because Beckett is Irish and so on.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Well, that's an interesting point. I mean, do you feel obligated to do a certain amount of productions that come from the community, either Hispanic writers or just a production that would relate?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** We feel obligated to attract people to theater and to the fine arts and performing arts and painting. And it's very hard now. This is a stage for us to develop audiences now. This play itself, I chose it because I fell in love with the play. But the criticism that the Chicanos cannot relate to Beckett is totally unfounded to me because we're humans. And Beckett is talking about human conditions. So we are depressed as well as anyone else. So we can really understand the play.

I feel committed to bring plays that are very identified with the people. But I don't limit myself to that. In fact, our whole organization wants to choose plays that are challenging to us in an artistic way so that we can therefore develop and learn more as we go on.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Have you done plays by young-- perhaps unknown Chicano playwrights?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** No. We have done plays from Latin America, plays that are very political. And we are very proud of that. People have enjoyed that. And it's enlightened them into some areas of history and so on. In Chicago, there are no Chicano playwrights. If there are, they are not very well-connected. But we're trying to find them. However, there are Chicano playwrights and we know of their works. And we are, in fact, interested in staging their plays very much.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Are your plays bilingual or totally in Spanish?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** We want to be bilingual, of course. Up till now, we have only done plays in Spanish. But we feel right now, it's very important moment for us and for our society as well because we're beginning to find out how rich a cultural society would be if you were bilingual. Because in other countries, almost anywhere else you go, most of the people are bilingual.

They speak either any one of two or three languages so that they can enjoy more and they can participate more in other people's culture. I think now the American people are finding out the importance of being bilingual.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Did you do the Beckett in Spanish?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** Yes. Beckett, we worked on the translation. It was done mostly by our director. We could not find a translation in Spanish anywhere so we did our own. And it came out very well.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Is that something that you're willing to do? Take the time to do that kind of work?



**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** Yes. If we like the work well enough, we will work. It doesn't matter to us how much we have to work. It will just be that much more experience for us.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** A company of four is rather limited. Do you rely upon the community for other acting spots?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** Yes. Of course, we have been supported in the past by universities. Up to now, we have performed in various universities around the Chicago area. To us, the most important thing now is to have our own place so that people know exactly where we are performing and not be confused as to what university and when.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Right. But I was thinking more in terms of if you needed a large cast, would you go out into the community to try to find additional actors, or are you pretty content to keep it at four?

**GABRIEL SANCHEZ:** No, we're not. Of course, it's four unfortunately because it's very hard to find people who have time to dedicate to perform in theater. I'm sure there are and we're trying to reach them by publicity and printing application forms where people can let us know where their interests lie, whether it's photography or painting or whatever. We want to know them. Of course, there have been some developments very recently in Chicago.

CBS has given some grants to different community organizations, Latino and Black and others. I think things are changing. People within the arts in Chicago have gone to see us and they're very excited about our play. They want us to perform it in English. And we are excited about that because they like the way we conceive the play and they're very excited about that.

**RICH DIETMAN:** Gabriel Sanchez, a founding member of the Chicano theater troupe, Artist Contemporaneos, located in Chicago.

**SPEAKER 1:** That's going to be nice, that mural in the highway.

**SPEAKER 2:** Well, let's bring out the scaffolding.

**SPEAKER 3:** Michael? Michael's in Denver.

**SPEAKER 2:** See if you can find two buckets over there.

**RICH DIETMAN:** Murals, the large paintings that adorn the sides of a growing number of city buildings, are another form Chicano artists have chosen to reach both members of their own community, as well as people around them. Armando Estrella is one of those artists. Estrella studied art at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. He also teaches at Inver Hills Junior College. His work has been exhibited nationwide.

Estrella was one of the artists in St. Paul this week who executed a mural for the Canto Al Pueblo. His was made up of three pictures. And the finished product was to be 8.5 feet high and approximately 23 feet wide. Tom Meersman caught up with Estrella earlier this week as he was beginning his mural. He began by asking Estrella what it was he hoped to paint.

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** It's going to be a triptych. And what I have is what is called El Cuento. And it's an old man with a child sitting on his lap, recounting an experience about the mythology of the Aztec culture, or as it is referred to, mythology. And in the background is a winged Aztec emperor with his legs turning into a plumed serpent. And then on the other two panels, I'm not sure as to what I'm going to put in it. I'm considering sharing the other two panels with a couple of other artists.

**TOM** What are the subjects of most of the murals that you've done around the Twin Cities?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Well, it's been referred to as cosmic art, which can mean just about anything. I have winged figures. I use a lot of bright color. I try to combine realism with abstract expressionism.

**TOM** Are you able to make a living doing this?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Well, I'm on a salary right now with the COMPASS Program. It's difficult to make a living off of this sort of thing when you have a lot of people like [? Naglees ?] around because they're strictly professional commercialism. And I'm not downgrading it. There's some fine commercial artwork around.

**TOM** So today, it's going to be gessoed, and then--

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Gessoed. And possibly later on, I get my chalk lines on there. And if time permits, I'll probably have my cartoon on there or my scale model drawn.

**TOM** When that's done, do you use a thin layer of paper that's perforated, and then use chalk to draw?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** No. That's a commercial technique.

**TOM** How do you do it then without the cartoon? I mean, not without the cartoons, but without the commercial way that you just said. How do you get it from the design on paper onto the wall?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** I use an old technique where you draw from a scale. I use an inch-to-foot scale and I do a grid over the scale model. And then from the grid, I refer each of the squares to the 1-inch squares and draw.

**TOM** Did somebody teach you to do this or did you learn a lot by yourself?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Jeez. It's hard to say because I started doing a lot of it since I was in elementary school.

**TOM** Really?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Yeah. Bulletin boards and stuff like that. I guess when I got into junior high, a lot of the teachers started asking me to do backdrops for dances and plays. And I did a couple of murals in junior high. And in high school, I did one in the foyer of the cafeteria with another student.

**TOM** Was that here where you grew? Did you grow up here?

**MEERSMAN:**

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** No. This is in Corpus Christi, Texas. That is where I'm originally from.

**TOM MEERSMAN:** If you had unlimited funds or let's say you had a lot of money and you could pretty much do exactly what you wanted to do, what would that be and where would that be?

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Jeez. If I had a lot of money, what I'd like to do is start up a school similar to some of the arts academies. And I myself would also like to take a chance and visit a couple of the art centers in the world and study some of the masters' works. I've had a chance of observing some of their pieces, some of their works at some of the local museums and in LA as well.

**TOM MEERSMAN:** Is that pretty much a big center for the type of work that you're mainly interested in?

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** What I'm trying to do is I'm trying to bridge this cultural gap that we have between what is considered the standard world of art, so-called, and our conception of what the arts are. At this point, we don't really have a respectable position among the art critics. We're considered genre artists-- that we are of a small group and really don't represent any significance. Or at least that's the feeling that a lot of us get, even when we get the finest professional training you can get.

I went to the College of Art and Design. And from what I understand, it was supposed to be one of the best ones. I applied for graduate school at a local school. I won't mention the name. And they turned me down. And I asked them, well, what is it that you guys want? And they never did answer my question. And it's been like that around the country for a lot of our finer artists.

The funny thing about it is that once they've established themselves and they gain a certain amount of recognition, then they're sought after. But not before that. And the graduate school turned them down right and left all the time. Then after that, they're very willing to do it. So it seems like America is told what the arts are all about from the East, from Europe.

It's not until after the Europeans accept somebody that America's-- well yeah. I guess they're all right. You know, Andy Warhol. A lot of these guys. Jackson Pollock. Yeah. Their works have to go abroad to get recognized.

**TOM MEERSMAN:** Can you talk a little bit more about what you were saying about bridging the gap? How could you do that through--

**ARMANDO ESTRELLA:** Combining the concepts of design, of composition, the contemporary-- concepts of design with some of our symbolisms and iconography and bringing them together, and do it in a manner that still leaves enough of a universal flavor to allow any culture to identify and appreciate it.

**RICH DIETMAN:** Chicano muralist Armando Estrella talking about his work with MPR's Tom Meersman.

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

In the last 15 years, literature in Latin America has gained major international attention. It is considered by some critics to be the most innovative, challenging ethnic writing in the world today. During the remainder of Spectrum today, we will hear from and about a man who is often singled out as one of the most talented contemporary Chicano writers.

The writer, along with Dr. Arnold Vento from whom we heard earlier in this program, is one of the driving forces behind the National Canto Movement. While in St. Paul attending this week's Midwest celebration, the writer spoke with Nancy Fushan.

**RAYMUNDO PEREZ:** I read about people, people understanding people in all levels.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Raymundo Perez, better known as Tigre, who now lives in Mesa, Arizona. His journeys have taken him to Chicano communities across America. He holds a degree from Oberlin College, but claims his real education has come from observing life in the barrio. Like most of his fellow Chicano writers, Tigre's work is bilingual and bicultural. Those are perhaps the two qualities which distinguished Chicano writing from other ethnic literature.

The writing straddles life and history, which are both Latin and American, a combination providing literature and poetry that is rich in cross-cultural characters and images. And there is also the central concern for the Chicanos' position in society. An example is Tigre's 1973 work, *Revolucionarios*, written in the midst of racial disturbances in Boulder, Colorado.

**RAYMUNDO PEREZ:** There is a window where I live. At night, you look out to see a sea of darkness. The city lights become different colored blimps. And the man whose legend was never heard lurks in your shadow. Grim solid facts of life we experience daily. There is no more deadlier bomb than a Neo-Mestizo.

Revolutionary, who has seen oppression dressed as a beautiful utopian plastic mask. *Revolucionarios*, who has grown deaf by his tears for his murdered companeros, now carries a bow as his secret companion. Revolutionaries who dream of what he can have. But once his existing hermanos/hermanas to have, *revolucionarios* lost in the dust of persecution. And the death flies brings shattering confusion. Lost soul from Tierra Lejana.

[SPEAKING SPANISH]

There is a window where I live. The darkness has a horizons of the distant city lights. Breaking through the social fog and fear, you shall emerge the survivors. *Revolucionarios* who hasn't refused and will not be driven out, who has remained within distance of his ever-present enemy.

*Revolucionarios* who will blend into all needed shapes to infiltrate. *Revolucionarios* who has realized what it is to die. For these *revolucionarios*, there will be no thankful homecoming. We'll light it clean home, for these *revolucionarios* will come without a trace.

**ARNOLD VENTO:** There is, in the poetry, however, of Chicanos, particularly the Canto Al Pueblo, a very deep concern for the inequities of this society.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Dr. Arnold Vento, professor of Mexican-American studies at the University of Texas.

**ARNOLD VENTO:** The injustices of society come out in the poetry of Tigre Perez. But I don't think that all of his poetry reflects just that type of protest, right? Perhaps some people would label that poetry of protest. I've seen in some of his poetry, as well as somebody else's poetry, that there are some very universal kinds of themes that come out. I've seen the theme of love come out-- the theme of universal human rights.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Tigre Perez views his role as a poet in more than strictly artistic terms. Using the wealth of material from the Mexican-American environment, Perez relates his writing to the history and education of his people.

**RAYMUNDO PEREZ:** For people to have history, and history is your existence, someone has to teach it to you and record it. So it's not necessarily that what's happening is what's being recorded. Who's doing the recording?

**NANCY FUSHAN:** Poets like you?

**RAYMUNDO PEREZ:** Well, see. The thing is that poets like me did not exist long ago until very recently because we as artists as a whole have never been recognized as artists. Yet there had to be countries like Mexico and Europe that would have to notice first the potential and cultural renaissance before the United States. And it's been in your backyard all this time.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** For that reason, Dr. Arnold Vento observes a tendency on the part of some Chicano writers to incorporate pre-Hispanic mythology and folklore into their work. And Vento adds that some of that mythology is misused.

**ARNOLD VENTO:** And that's simply because-- well, the history hasn't been rewritten in terms of what was left in Mexico. And so we have consequently-- not necessarily white man's view of what was there before, but the Spaniards' view of what was there before. And they're the ones that invaded the country. They're the ones that censored everything. They rewrote it and they burned everything and so on and so forth.

So we don't really have an accurate view. We don't even have an accurate picture of what was there before. There are some people that are studying the oral tradition. They're studying with some of the so-called natives to try to rectify these historical distortions.

**NANCY FUSHAN:** That's interesting. And that Tigre was saying, if I'm paraphrasing him right, that his role as poet is to be almost a historian in a creative way.

**ARNOLD VENTO:** Yeah, I think so. I have administered various programs in Chicano studies. And certainly, as I sat there trying to develop a new program, I had to think about the responsibility that was on my shoulders to try to rewrite the sociology, the psychology, the history, and so on of Chicanos. And I think that's something that happens naturally in research. But it's a very special research. And I think that everyone subconsciously does this.

They feel that they have a mission to do this. And if you're a poet, you're always searching for the truth anyway, whatever that may be. And if you search for a truth, you're an investigator. You're a researcher. And so you're also a historian.

**RAYMUNDO PEREZ:** Stone exchange. Perceptive distortions prance around my vision in blindness, to be awakened by a chilling sight of pure white beauty floating in space. To regain balance, only to be derailed by the spontaneous fulfillment of one's deepest desires. And like a fool, one walks away knowing I've been had. But this time, there was no deceit. There will be no sad tears dripping from a burning soul or despair with misery and shattered dreams.

And at last, you cease to play and extend your fresh shawl of life and touch my tormented face. Vision mind that wanders by. Bruja Mount Rainier, we've met and became friends without God or fear.

**RICH DIETMAN:** Chicano poet, Raymundo Tigre Perez. He was talking with Nancy Fushan.

[SPANISH SINGING]

While this week's Canto Al Pueblo created a spirit of unity among the participating artists and community residents, as a footnote, we should mention some disappointments. Filmmaker Juan Salazar had planned to produce a documentary on the Midwest Canto. According to artists, funding fell through and Salazar did not come to St. Paul. Also, a noted Latin American theater company based in Colombia had been scheduled to perform during the closing days of the canto.

But on Thursday, they notified canto organizers that a key member of the troop had been hospitalized in Bogota, forcing the cancellation of their performance. And in a more significant situation, canto organizers held fast to their spirit of tying together the Hispanic community through art by confronting a flare-up of unrelated community disturbances throughout the week's sporadic violence that included one death occurred on the west side.

Some of the artists wanted to call off the canto. Others wanted to ignore what were termed long standing problems by the police and community leaders. In the end, the canto committee decided that with precautions, the canto should go on. And the goal, which should last beyond the final canto event, is the gift of art that the Hispanic community can give not only to itself, but to all the inhabitants of St. Paul.

[SPANISH SINGING]

Technical director for this program has been John Lampland. Music was performed by Los Folkloristas and included Siquisiri, La Huasanga, Manifiesto, and Tresero. I'm Rich Dietman.

[SPANISH SINGING]