







Oaxaca Times

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Environment	The Artist	Oaxaqueños	News
Paraje Bonanza Organic farm turns eroded hills into fertile land. Report p.13 	Raúl Herrera Painting as a form of meditation. Profile p.11 	The Mixtecs Fiesta days in the Town of the Mountain Birds. Essay p.12 	Community Radios The struggle for legal status. Report p.5 



A NEW VISTA FROM THE VOLCANO

Mexican Filmmaker Ignacio Cruz reimagines Malcolm Lowry's classic novel of love and loss...

Page 8

WHAT'S ON * NEWS * ACCOMODATION * DINING OUT * CLUBS & MORE ...

LEARN SPANISH AT THE ICC: OAXACA'S BEST LANGUAGE SCHOOL

What's Up

Life in the City

Sending a Signal

Mexico's community radios struggle for legal status.

By DAN KEANE

Only a month after community radio supporters from around the country gathered at the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO) to draft a letter to President Vicente Fox urging him "to recognize the right of the people to have their own radio stations," the president has made it clear he does not intend to heed their request.

Appearing at a national convention of radio and television workers held on May 7 in Culiacán, Sinaloa, Fox declared that his government had already succeeded in shutting 52 of Mexico's 100 "clandestine" community radio stations, and was now working on closing down the 48 still remaining.

Signed by such cultural luminaries as authors Carlos Fuentes and Juan Goytisolo, as well as Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo, who helped organize the meeting, the letter had asked that the president "legally validates the social work that these small communication projects achieve, offering information of local interest that the large media monopolies do not pick up." While frustrated by the president's words, community radio supporters such as IAGO director Fernando Gálvez de Aguinaga remain defiant.

"We believe that mass media communications are an important part of any democracy. They have become the transmitters of ideas, of information, of public discourse," Gálvez says. "A democracy cannot claim to be a true democracy when information is controlled by large corporations. As long as the citizens do not have the right to have their own radio stations, we will be living in an antidemocratic regime."

Since the technology first became widely available about forty years ago, scores of low-powered, community-orientated radio stations have operated throughout Mexico without official licenses from the government. Many are low-tech affairs that concen-

trate on the promotion of indigenous culture, local health initiatives, and community issues; public aims which supporters argue do not deserve the president's "clandestine" tag.

An example in Oaxaca is the 250-watt Radio Calenda, broadcasting at 104.5 FM from San Antonio Castillo Velasco, near Ocotlán, less than an hour south of the capital. Launched in 1995, the station now transmits seventy hours of programming a week, including shows devoted to Zapotec language and culture, the promotion of literacy, and the prevention of drug addiction and violence against women. Radio Calenda does play a little rock *en Español* for the kids, but, in a stated attempt to counterbalance the daily onslaught of commercial TV and radio, the station will not play any songs in English.

While Radio Calenda does not have a permit to operate from the Secretaría de Comunicación y Transportes, or SCT, which regulates radio broadcasting in Mexico, its operations are anything but clandestine. Calenda beams its signal from a kiosk in the park right in the middle of San Antonio, and the station was even the subject of a glowing feature article written by the Consejo Nacional para Cultura y los Artes, or National Council for Culture and Art, available on their official government website. Other Oaxaca stations have not been so fortunate, however. Radio Jen Poj for instance, based in Tlahuitoltepec, had focused its programming on the promotion of Mixtec culture and music, but two years ago the SCT shut it down and seized its broadcasting equipment.

Meanwhile, other community radio stations such as Mexico City's Radio Guadalupe or Hermosillo-based Radio Bemba, keep a much higher profile, broadcasting their signals over the Internet and maintaining extensive websites devoted to providing an alternative to commercial media.

The April meeting at IAGO provided community radio representatives with an opportunity to sit down with officials of the Secretaría de Gobernación and continue an existing dialogue about how community stations might achieve some sort of legal status. While the SCT, though invited, declined to attend, the federal officials who did show up left the door open to legalizing community radio stations at some future date.

"We must make an analysis of the concept in order to arrive at proposals to change the regulations," said Hector Villareal, the director of the Secretaría de Gobernación's office of radio and television, as quoted by the news magazine *Proceso*.

"That is, precisely, to study the issue case by case with the SCT in order to determine what could be a reason to permit (each station to broadcast) and what might not."

For their part, radio boosters argue that lifting the prohibition on community stations is a simple matter of freedom of speech.

"They always repeat the same pretenses," Gálvez says. "They say that these are guerrilla radio stations, subversive stations, that they stir up the people, that they are against government projects. But the reality is that that the government don't want people to have ways of communicating amongst themselves and information to circulate without having reviewed it first."



Drawing by René Almanza

Oaxaca - Palo Alto

40 years of friendship.

By SARAH SACKS-IRVINE

This month, a group of forty-six people from Palo Alto, California are coming to Oaxaca to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the sister city program uniting the two towns. As part of the program, six exchange students from Oaxaca and six from Palo Alto will have a unique opportunity to exchange ideas, share their cultures, and practice each other's languages. They will also create lifelong friendships. "It is an experience that changes their lives," says María del Pilar Zamora de Morales, director of the Committee of Sister Cities Oaxaca-Palo Alto whose own children have participated in the exchange program.

In 1964, when Palo Alto and Oaxaca

City officially became sister towns, both cities had populations of about fifty thousand and many travelers from Palo Alto were already vacationing in Oaxaca, which shares a similar climate. Oaxacan Don Carlos Hamilton, whose grandparents were from Palo Alto, was the first president of the Committee. Along the years, although Oaxaca has maintained programs with four other sister towns in Costa Rica, Venezuela, France and Japan, the city has developed the most active relationship with Palo Alto.

The U.S. sister city program originated in 1956 when President Eisenhower proposed a citizen diplomacy initiative, the Town Affiliation Program. Now under the auspices of Sister Cities International (SCI), partnerships between U.S. and international communities are established to increase global cooperation at the municipal level,

promote cultural understanding, and stimulate economic development.

The annual summer student exchange program is one of many that Oaxaca and Palo Alto collaborate on together. Other projects in Oaxaca include the construction of the observatory and planetarium, the support the Albergue Infantil Josefino, a home for orphaned and abused children, and the Programa Niño-a-Niño, a health education program for children.

On June 19, the tree that represents the cities connection in El Llano Park will be adorned with a new plaque. Other events will include a concert by the Oaxaca Symphony, visits to the supported programs in Oaxaca, and a special dedication at the Sunday concert in the Zócalo.

For more information about the festivities and the program contact María del Pilar Zamora de Morales, the director, at mozar@prodigy.net.mx

ANOTHER VISTA FROM THE VOLCANO

Mexican Filmmaker Ignacio Cruz reimagines Malcolm Lowry's classic novel of love and loss.

Report by DAN KEANE

Among the host of books written about Mexico by foreign authors, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* sits somewhere down at the gloomy end of the bookshelf, stewing in its own desperation and ambition, gathering indifferent dust and cult followers in equal measure.

First published in 1947, Malcolm Lowry's vaguely autobiographical alcoholic nightmare is a sweaty tangle of long, swirling sentences, obscure literary references, extended flashbacks and drunken daydreams. It is a daunting read, to be sure, and intensely problematic to anyone hoping to make it into a film. Ignacio Cruz isn't even trying.

The Oaxacan-born filmmaker, interviewed recently by email, makes it clear from the start that his new project *Mezcal* is not an adaptation of Lowry's novel, but simply a new exploration of the book's broodings over love, death, and, of course, mezcal.

"*Under the Volcano* is for me an inspiration to tell the story that I am interested in telling: characters stricken with inconsolable grief who search for the solace they need to live," Cruz writes. "I have never wanted to film the novel as it is written, because I believe no adaptation could reach the great heights of the literary work. Any adaptation would end up being a mere illustration of the chapters and characters, as has already happened," he said, referring to American film director John Huston's 1984 more faithful interpretation of the book.

Set in a fictionalized version of central Mexico where the twin summits of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl are constantly looming in the background, *Under the Volcano* takes place almost entirely in a single day, The Day of Dead in November of 1938. The story begins in Cuauhnahuac, a stand-in for Cuernavaca, a small city in the state of Morelos, just south of Mexico City, where Lowry and his wife lived in the 1930s. As the day wears on, the action marches irrevocably

towards a small town called Paríán and El Farolito, a cantina there fairly worshipped by the book's dipsomaniac main character, a retired British Consul named Geoffrey Firmin.

The real Paríán is in fact a tiny hamlet in the Mixteca region of northwest Oaxaca state, not far from Cruz' hometown of Teposcolula. Reading *Under the Volcano* for the first time as a young man, the director was immediately captivated by Lowry's depiction of the landscape he grew up in as both an earthly paradise and inescapable inferno.

"The world I knew, upon reading both Lowry and (famous modern Mexican author Juan) Rulfo, revealed itself to me as a stage, as an atmosphere," Cruz says. Indeed, the director cites Rulfo's stories as the chief inspiration for two of his previous films, *The Edge of the Earth* (1994) and *Bed Time Fairy Tales for Crocodiles* (2002), both filmed in Oaxaca, the latter of which won seven Ariel Awards, Mexico's equivalent of the Oscars.

Cruz would dearly like to realize *Mezcal* on that familiar stage, but a few financial questions remain. Of the film's projected cost of US\$1.35 million, US\$1 million will be picked up by El Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE) and Malayerba, a production company Cruz formed with fellow director Carlos Carrera (best known abroad for *The Crime of Padre Amaro*, 2002). Cruz first asked the state of Oaxaca to help out with \$200,000 of the remaining costs, not in cash but in food, accommodations, and transportation. Oaxacan officials initially balked at the proposal, and the central state of Guanajuato has since pledged to give Cruz the support he needs to begin filming. Meanwhile, the director has recently reestablished negotiations with Oaxaca in hopes of keeping his project in his home state.

The Mixteca truly has a hold on Cruz. To be in that country, wandering its deep

ravines under the pale winter sunlight is "to be able to walk through sadness itself," the director says. It is this sentiment he and Lowry share. Early in *Under the Volcano*, the despondent Consul pens a late night letter to his lover, a letter he never manages to send: "So that when you left, Yvonne, I went to Oaxaca. There is no sadder word."

It is this desperation Cruz hopes to capture in his film, whether he finds it here in Oaxaca or has to chase it down somewhere in Guanajuato. In either location, the director aims to recreate Lowry's Paríán and El Farolito as more than simply locations but "states of the soul."

"What is important is not the cantinas, but the spirit of those who drink mezcal," Cruz says. "It is something one can see in Dante, in Lowry, in the Day of the Dead, in Antigone, in Hegel, in *La Virgen de la Soledad*, and above all in the dying light of day and the sound of a trumpet; it is jazz, it is blues, it is Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker, Pete Lewis' 'Harmonica Boogie'; it is the Brooklyn Bridge, it is the music of a *banda* playing '*Dios nunca muere*,' it is the crimes committed at dusk, the dead left lying in the dusk. It is that of a man completely drunk on mezcal in a small town in the Mixteca as the sun is going down."

"Remember Oaxaca?"
"—Oaxaca?—"
"—Oaxaca.—"

—The word was like a breaking heart, a sudden peal of stifled bells in a gale, the last syllables of one dying of thirst in the desert. Did she remember Oaxaca! The roses and the great tree, was that, and the dust and the buses to Etla and Nochistlán?... Or at night their cries of love, rising into the ancient fragrant Mayan air, heard only by ghosts? In Oaxaca they had found each other once... Divorce. What did the word really mean? She'd



Malcolm



John Huston's *Under the Volcano* (1984)

looked it up in

the dictionary, on the ship: to sunder, to sever. And divorced meant: sundered, severed. Oaxaca meant divorce. They had not been divorced there but that was where the Consul had gone when she left, as if into the heart of the sundering, of the severance. Yet they had loved one another! But it was though their love were wandering over some desolate cactus plain, far from here, lost, stumbling and falling, attacked by wild beasts, calling for help - dying, to sigh at last, with a kind of weary peace: Oaxaca—



Lowry

The Search for El Farolito

Malcolm Lowry was fond of cantinas. *Under the Volcano*, his greatest novel, stumbles through at least five different cantinas in the course of one long day, leaving his readers alternately dizzy, thirsty, and wondering whether any of these fascinatingly bleak joints actually exist. Though the true answer is lost somewhere in the late author's secrets and memories, anyone willing to put back a mezcalito or two, or three, might find themselves face to face with Lowry's drunken muse right here in Oaxaca.

Sometime in the mid-1930s, Lowry and his first wife Jan Gabriel stayed at the Hotel Francia on Calle 20 de Noviembre. The hotel sits just a block or so up the street from La Farola, a cantina first opened in 1916 whose name bears a striking similarity to El Farolito, the black hole at the center of *Under the Volcano's* cantina universe. Considering both the La Farola's proximity to the hotel and the author's legendary thirst, it seems a safe bet that Lowry tipped a few mezcalz there.

"It's a popular legend that the old people tell," says Eder Escobar Lopez, the young manager of La Farola, Oaxaca's oldest cantina. "They say that an Anglo writer used to come down here from the Hotel Francia, sit at a table in the corner, and drink mezcal while he wrote." Escobar adds that La Farola's popular history includes a story about Ernest Hemingway doing much the same thing.

Under the Volcano is the inspiration behind Oaxacan filmmaker Ignacio Cruz' current project *Mezcal*, which will begin filming later this year and will include its own interpretation of both the fabled El Farolito and Parián, the strange little town in which the cantina sits. The director points out that the actual Parián, a nearly abandoned town in the Mixtec country in northwest Oaxaca, is too small to have ever supported its own cantina.

"I am sure that if the cantina with the name El Farolito did exist, it was in some other place," Cruz says. "Other people say that it did exist, but that it was torn down a long time ago."

A more likely explanation, the director says, is that El Farolito that appears in the novel is an amalgamation of the author's experiences in watering holes across the state.

"I believe El Farolito is all the cantinas of Oaxaca, above all the cantinas in the small towns of the Mixteca, more than in

the city itself," Cruz says.

Lowry himself seems to have been haunted by the cantina he brought to life. In *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, a collection of the author's stories published 11 years after his death, a thinly veiled stand-in for Lowry tromps around



Malcolm Lowry's passport picture

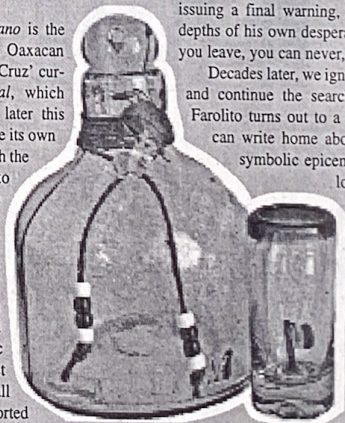
Oaxaca with his new wife on a tour of all the places that inspired his great novel. Though they search and search, El Farolito is nowhere to be found. It is as if Lowry is issuing a final warning, from the drunken depths of his own desperate nostalgia: once you leave, you can never, ever go back.

Decades later, we ignore Lowry's words and continue the search, hoping that El Farolito turns out to a charming dive we can write home about rather than the symbolic epicenter of the author's losing battle with alcoholism. Cruz, a longtime fan of Lowry, cautions that to seek out El Farolito is to leap into the same dark fatalism Lowry found at the bottom of every bottle of

mezcal. One might not want to look too hard, for fear of what one might find.

"In order to understand Lowry's spirit, a visitor should travel around the Mixteca before ending up at la Casa de Mezcal (Calle Flores Magon 209) in the city of Oaxaca," the director says. "They should drink a mezcal here and then step out onto the sidewalk and watch the Indian men and women leaving the Mercado Juarez... Then, perhaps, they should go find some deathly dismal brothel, in order to really feel like Lowry."

D. K.



"Ladies and Gentlemen: The Live Turkey!"

By LAURA ORRICO

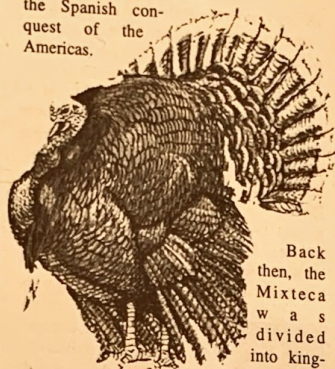
Finally, the rhythmic traditional *sones de sampalilú* fill up the air. The wedding guests, who have already enjoyed the church ceremony and a delicious Oaxacan meal, suddenly grab tortillas, a pot of *mole* sauce, rice and beans, baskets of flowers, branches of the local herb *poleo*, and bottles of mezcal. The real fiesta is about to begin.

Out comes the live turkey, or *guajolote*, adorned with a necklace of flowers.

Following the beat of the band, up to hundreds of participants form a circle and begin the *Baile de Guajolote*, or Dance of the Turkey. While the mezcal livens up the atmosphere and breaks down the walls between the two families, the dancers hold the food, the flowers, and the herbs over their heads. One after another, they clutch the wondering turkey under its wings and raise and swing it high in the air (to the despair of the North American guests).

The dance, which can last hours, comes from the tradition-rich *Mixteca Alta*, a region that spans over the three states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Puebla. Through oral history, the Mixtecos remember the significance of

the *Baile de Guajolote*, which dates back to a time when the indigenous populations ruled their own land, before the Spanish conquest of the Americas.



Back then, the Mixteca was divided into kingdoms whose dueling *guerreros*, or warriors, maintained a constant state of warfare. One day however, two major opposing kings decided to pacify their lands and strengthen their kingdoms of Tilantongo and Achiultla-Tlaxiaco, by forming a new alliance. They established a pact

and unified their regions.

To guaranty the viability of the pact, the Mixteca kings chose to marry their most prominent children. The wedding was a major event: all the townspeople attended to bare witness to the new state of peace. The ceremony was marked by a special dance, in which a warrior from each kingdom presented an exotic bird, displaying its impressive plumage in a dance to traditional *sones*. The guests carried food and flowers as offerings, and *poleo* as a symbol of fraternity. The dance acted as a gesture of thanks to their gods and officially joined the two families together in an unquestionable bond.

Centuries later, the *Baile de Guajolote* still takes place in many wedding ceremonies. The turkey, a common symbol of cultural and historic importance for the Mixteca, was chosen to represent the exotic bird once danced by the warriors.

To this day, in a gesture of honor and thanks after the dance, the newly united families offer the *padrinos*, or witnesses of the wedding, the tortillas, the *mole* sauce, the rice and beans as well as the worn-out and tousled turkey.

A miracle birth in Oaxaca's mountains

Text and Photos by ASKARI MATEOS

The wooden-handled knife with a six-inch blade still lies in the kitchen.

These days, Inés Ramirez Perez uses it to chop up vegetables and onions. But four years ago, she plunged it into her womb and cut 15 centimeters up her abdomen to carry out the world's only known successful, self-performed caesarean section. Her story came to light a couple of months ago, when a Chicago doctor mentioned it in the International Journal for Gynecology and Obstetrics. We found Inés Ramírez Pérez in her remote pueblo of Rio Talea, an eight-hour journey south of Oaxaca.

The 43-year-old woman lives in a dirt-floor house one hour away from the nearest phone, and three hours away from the nearest town, San Lorenzo Texmelucan, itself a six-hour journey from the nearest hospital.

On the night of March 6, 2000, Inés' husband and two sons had gone away to another town to sell some grains. She had only her 8-year old son Benito with her when she began to feel the same searing cramps she experienced the year before, when she lost a baby who would have been her seventh child.

She paced around in circles, trying to keep calm. "I was screaming and crying in excruciating pain, thinking I was going to die," remembers the slim but sturdy woman. To kill the pangs, she drank out of a small bottle of proof alcohol. It was around midnight. Thinking the baby might be already dead, she asked Benito to reach for the knife. She sat on a chair and slowly cut herself open until she was able to pull the baby out by his feet.

The baby cried immediately. "I was so surprised and happy he was alive and I'd saved my baby," she remembers. "That was what I really wanted." But Inés was loosing blood and growing weaker and

colder by the minute. She thought she was not going to last long, so she wrapped the baby in a bedroll, managed to put logs on the fire, and sent Benito off for help. At around 4 am, a man named Leon came by and managed to close the wound with a needle and thread. "I didn't feel anything," Inés remembers. "I guess I was still drunk." Leon wrapped her in a blanket and minutes later her husband arrived and took her to San Lorenzo. But there, the nurses did not have the necessary equipment and Inés

had to be taken by police van to a bigger town, Sola de Vega, and then by ambulance to San Pablo Huixtepec, on the Oaxaca-Puerto Escondido highway. The entire journey took eight hours and they arrived there at 2 pm. Only then did she feel afraid.

But her nightmare was over. Three days later, the father brought to the hospital the baby who had stayed at home: a complete check up showed the boy was fine. They named him Orlando and today, a healthy little boy of 4, he attends nursery school every day.



Inés with the knife she used



Orlando, 4.