Calendar

Local Events *page* **57**

Classical Music *page* **72**

Art Museums & Galleries *page* **75**

Theater *page* **76**

Pop Music *page* **80**

Movies *page* **115**

Restaurants *page* **124**

River of Epic Tragedy

Performance Art Migration

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Family and friends at the casket of Jaime Chavez-Muñoz

"There is no tragic story in my family as a result of migration," says journalist-poet Rubén Martinez. "But my family's story is migration. My mom left El Salvador in her late teens, by herself, going off on a pretty amazing journey in the late 1950s. My father traveled back and forth incessantly between here and Mexico with his parents. Migration has always been part of my history, and part of California's history."

In 1996, Martinez was sent by his editor at Pacific News Service to cover the aftermath of a tragedy that took place on the highway near Temecula. A pick-up truck carrying 26 undocumented migrants had crashed while being pursued by the Border Patrol. Among the dead were three brothers, Jaime, Salvador, and Benjamin Chavez-Muñoz, 19, 20, and 23 years old. They had been going to pick strawberries in Watsonville. Martinez went to their hometown in the Mexican highlands of Chéran, Michoacán, to interview surviving family members. He filed his story; the assignment was over. But the event had so affected him, he began to write more and more. When he finished, he had 800 pages.

LOCAL EVENTS

Besides the immensity of the tragedy, what struck him was the dynamics of Cherán. "It's a typical Indian village — very provincial — in many respects. On the other hand, within minutes of arrival, I encountered all kinds of transcultural signs. Fleets of late-model cars, with license plates from Iowa, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Kentucky, blasting hip-hop bass from mammoth speakers. Kids wearing Chicago Bulls windbreakers. Chicano-like graffiti all over the walls. Satellite dishes crowning crumbling adobe homes. And all of this, a result, obviously, of migration. Over a third of Chéran's 30,000 inhabitants leave the town in early spring, just about now, in fact. They spend the picking season in the States. And when they return home, they carry American pop with them, just as they bring their indigenous culture here."

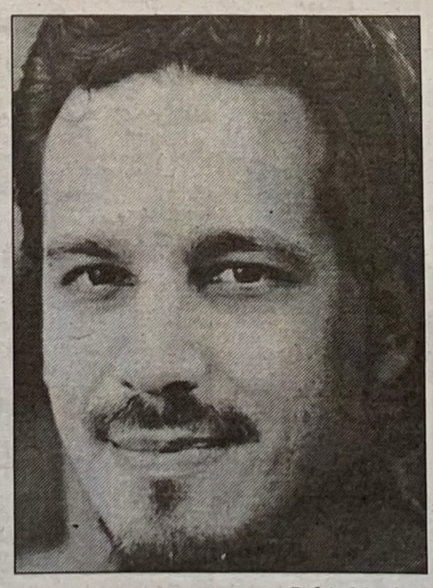
Martinez's many pages have become a book, to be published by Henry Holt. He has also used the material to create a live presentation of words and music. "While I worked on the manuscript, I was living where I am now, in the Mojave Desert, near Joshua Tree National Park. And on days when I didn't write, the musical portion happened. That's when I picked up the guitar and naturally melded these songs to the narrative."

Significantly, the music is an amalgam of the two cultures. Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison Blues* becomes a lively norteña in Martinez's arrangement. The presentation, *Border Ballad*, is itself an admixture. Martinez calls it, "loosely," performance art. Neither a musical nor spoken word, it uses elements of both to tell the story of the brothers' siblings, who return to the States after their grieving, despite the risks and their mother's fears.

Although the work is "documentary," not fiction, Martinez has invented a narrator, "a man in black" — a preacher. "I have always been fascinated by evangelicals, particularly among immigrants here in the States and throughout Latin America. Half my family is Pentecostal. My uncle is a big Jehovah's Witness preacher. I'm still Catholic, but the evangelicals have made their mark on me."

The preacher holds more than personal significance. "In the Old Testament and in the New, there are all kinds of migrant narratives. Think of the Jews crossing the Jordan into Canaan, fleeing persecution. And so I use him to quote scripture, to make the story more mythical, timeless, universal."

Ironically, he knew that one of the biggest artistic challenges of the piece was to avoid "preachiness." How did he do it? "I stuck to the story. I mean, it's already larger than life. There's the epic thing. Terrible tragedy. People going on in spite of it. Crossing rivers!"



Rubén Martinez

Martinez, who teaches at Claremont-McKenna College, performs at colleges across the country. He describes the style as "vernacular," saying, "I play with voices, and tones," all from the migrants' point of view. That perspective is "almost never" represented in the media, he observes. So he decided it would be his "guiding literary light."

The story of Rosa, the brothers' younger sister, is the most dramatic, says Martinez, who has tracked her all these years. "While the other siblings have got their legal papers, she is still illegal. The three who died didn't have papers, either. So you could say that's why they died."

Rosa is somewhere in St. Louis, Missouri, right now.

— *Jeanne Schinto*

Border Ballad: Tales from the New Frontier
Friday, April 7, 7:00 p.m.
Grossmont College
8800 Grossmont College Drive
El Cajon
Free
Info: 619-644-7186