

Alza Tu Voz (Speak Out): From Picket Line to Radio

by Hugo Morales

At the age of nine, I, along with my eight-year-old sister and my thirteen-year-old brother, became prune pickers. My family had moved from Oaxaca, Mexico, to Northern California to join my father, who had immigrated before us as an undocumented worker. Working alongside us were poor White children—who were openly called “Okies”—and Black children, as well as Mexican immigrant and Mexican American families. We were all migrants to the Sonoma County farms. It was very exciting to meet kids from all over the West, including migrant families from inland California and Mexican American migrants from Southern Texas. We picked crops together, shared the same improvised outhouses and common showers, and lived in tents at the same labor camp. There was another camp next to us that housed Filipino workers—all single, older men who had been denied the right to marry. My father enjoyed their company and so did I. They were friendly and knew Spanish, and I did not speak English. I particularly liked their delicious food.

Hundreds of families came to look for work at this 100-acre prune farm. All of them poor. They packed their old cars with kids and minimal belongings. But only about a dozen were accepted into the labor camp. The rejected families continued to look for work at the neighboring farms.

The pay was terrible. The adults earned a dollar and twenty-five cents per hour. The growers also paid twenty-five cents a box, so as a kid, I helped out by filling three boxes of prunes every hour. Farm work was also dangerous. While picking apples, I witnessed a Mexican American father accidentally run over his two-year-old toddler with a tractor. I will never forget the sobbing of the heartbroken father. Access to higher education for farmworkers of any race was minimal. College was out of the question, and joining the Army was the only way out of the farm. For me, it was only when I caught tuberculosis and was put in isolation in a sanitarium for a year that I saw a whole world outside. That was 1963.

Fifty years ago in 1965 Filipino and Mexican American farmworkers went to strike in Delano, California. The strike lasted more than five years. It was a painful experience for the participating farmworkers who received little financial support. But in their effort to get a decent wage and better working conditions, the participating families felt they had no choice but to leave the fields and decline to pick grapes.

The epicenter of the workers movement was Delano, but throughout the United States, the mood among children, youth, and adult farmworkers changed. Through this movement we saw ourselves united to work for better working conditions.

Under the leadership of [César Chávez](#), Philip Vera Cruz, Larry Itliong, Dolores Huerta, and hundreds of youth farmworker organizers like Eliseo Medina and the Govea family, the movement brought about a spirit for change. Music and theater, such as the [Teatro Campesino](#)'s [Agustín Lira](#), [Danny Valdez](#), and Luis Valdez, as well as the [United Farmworkers](#)' newspaper *El Malcriado*, were key to this change. That energy, the creativity of grass roots organizing, and the dreams of farmworker children and youth are captured on the Folkways album [Rolas de Aztlán: Songs of the Chicano Movement](#). In that album you can hear the live recording of a meeting with farmworkers in Delano in 1966. "[De colores](#)" is the popular song that sprung our enthusiasm to continue the struggle. And the song "[El picket sign](#)," a creation of Teatro Campesino, tells of the farmworkers' willingness to defy power structure and carry a picket sign in the striking fields. All these expressions are vital to the changing narrative about farm work and Mexican American communities in the United States.

My father, Rafael Morales Mendoza, was a Mixteco folk music musician who instilled in me the value of traditional music. Despite those long hours in the fields, he still found time to play the violin and the guitar. He and his fellow Mixteco farm workers got together and formed the first Mexican musical band in the North Bay, with violins, guitars, saxophones, trombones, a bass, drums, and an accordion. To me, as a child and as a teen living in a farm worker labor camp in Healdsburg, California, it was truly an inspiration to witness the artistic contribution of our farm worker community and the sounds of the beautiful music in the labor camps.

They would practice their instruments at least once a week and our families would visit each other from neighboring labor camps each Sunday afternoon, after Catholic mass, and my father and his friends would play their instruments. The sounds south of the border came to life with traditional tunes of love and dreams.

Every summer morning at 4 a.m., we would wake up to the musical sounds of Spanish radio KLOK-AM from San Jose broadcasting accordion border music and traditional mariachi. It would get us excited to wake up every morning. In the summers, there

would be Tejano and Mexican trios who would come to Healdsburg to the local theater to perform. About three times per year, great artists like [José Alfredo Jiménez](#) and Juan Mendoza would play live on Sundays at the local theater. The tickets cost a couple of dollars. One year, a mariachi of orphans from Monterrey came to Healdsburg and our family housed two 12-year-olds in our labor camp quarters for a couple of nights. They were on tour to raise money for their orphanage in Monterrey, Mexico.

It is through these experiences that I got my education about organizing and traditional culture. My father would talk about our Native Mixteco history, culture, and practices. He would also share notes on organizing fellow Mixtecos in his village and their quest for access to public education and transportation. He would also tell us the story of how he learned to play the violin and guitar as an 8-year-old in his village and how music is so important to the soul of every human being. He would also advise about how important music can be in community organizing efforts.

Experiencing the music in my labor camp and learning from the Delano farm worker movement affirmed my identity as a Mixteco, Mexican American. That positive identification as Mexican American and the affirmation of belonging are captured in several recordings on Smithsonian Folkways, including “[Yo soy chicano](#),” “[América de los indios](#)” by Danny Valdez, and “[Quihubo raza!](#)” by Agustín Lira. The farmworker movement changed the lives of many Mexican Americans, extending all the way to urban settings. This reach is captured by the song “[Chicano Park Samba](#)” by Los Alacranes Mojados, which documents the struggle of our urban barrios to win green space in the city of San Diego.

This treasure of music, coupled with the example of my brother, Cándido Morales Rosas, led me to co-found the nonprofit radio network Radio Bilingüe in 1976. Radio is an accessible technology to everyone; it also lends itself to wide participation. For decades, Radio Bilingüe has hosted a special training program for farm worker youth to change the narrative on issues that youth care about. Fifty years since the outbreak of the Delano grape strike, this program, called “Alza tu voz” (Speak Out), trains six to twelve farmworker youth in Salinas, California, on an annual basis. It is a daily after-school radio hour for youth, by youth, on issues that matter to them, such as adequate health care, family housing, and support for undocumented workers.

In striving for social wellbeing, these youths are able to address current issues in their community, find their perspectives, and amplify their voices through radio. In a way, programs like this allow immigrant youths the opportunity to follow the spirit and footsteps of those who held the picket signs decades earlier.

Hugo Morales is the executive director and co-founder of [Radio Bilingüe](#). He earned his law degree from Harvard University and was awarded a MacArthur “genius” Fellowship in 1994. In addition to his work in radio, he has served as a lawyer, university lecturer, media professional, farm laborer, and migrant workers’ advocate. In the summer of 2016, he will participate in the [Sounds of California](#) program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.