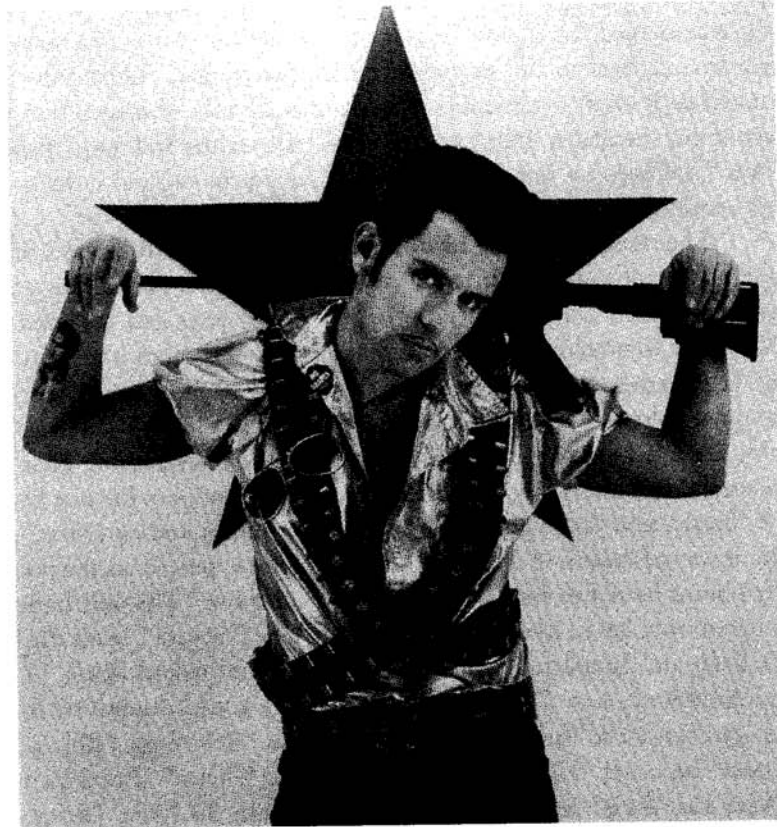


If there is any hope for America it lies in a Revolution.
If there is any hope for a Revolution it lies in getting
Elvis Presley to become Che Guevara.

—Phil Ochs



Rock and Revolution:
An Interview with El Vez,
the Mexican Elvis

Mainstream American popular music is synonymous with big business and synergy-seeking transnational executives. It is marketed like any other product and in turn is used to market everything from shampoo to hamburgers to Presidents. Many of us cringe when we hear Beatles songs selling overpriced sneakers or Janis Joplin's voice promoting luxury sedans. The commodification of real human emotions, feelings and beliefs tends to make people cynical because it encourages the view that music can't provide anything substantive in the way of message or authenticity. For anyone who grows up with popular music, though, its effect on us can't be denied. It's central to our culture because it has the power to document, react to and improvise on the private and public politics of our lives. It often comments—directly or indirectly—on such things as economic inequality, race, sexuality, feminism, crime and more. Popular music has been an important avenue of American cultural influence in the world, for better or for worse.

The music of El Vez, a.k.a. Robert López, has a unique position in the history of popular American music. He has entertained fans across two continents with his back-up singers the Elvettes and his band the Memphis Mariachis. Much more than just another Elvis impersonator, El Vez's performances are made up of a high-energy blend of Mexican popular culture, Memphis kitsch and grass roots politics. While undeniably attracted to the showy glamour emblematic of everything Elvis, his powerful and direct commentaries on Mexican-American history, life on the border and the plight of the barrio both inform and entertain. One good way of summing up the El Vez experience appeared on the publicity photos he signed for his fans after a recent show: "The only hope for a Revolution lies in Elvis Presley becoming Che Guevara," reads the Phil Ochs quote. Supported primarily by independent record labels, El Vez has produced seven CDs in as many years and toured extensively in the United States and Europe. He rewrites familiar Elvis songs. "Blue Suede Shoes" becomes "Huaraches Azules," "In the Ghetto" "En el Barrio." "Viva Las Vegas" becomes "Viva La Raza," with the lyrics, "Aztec city sacrifice my soul / sacrifice my soul on fire / after Mayans and Toltecs came Tenotchtlan / taking civilization much higher." His version of Elvis's "Little Sister" becomes an empowering feminist "Chicanisma."

Robert López started impersonating Elvis just for kicks but he soon gained a devoted following and found ways to include political and social commentary in what he was doing. He writes songs about Aztec kings, Frida Kahlo, Zapata, César Chávez, Proposition 187, *pochos* and, last not but least, himself. The melody of the first track on his 1996 "Rock and Revolution" release, for example, is James Brown's "I'm Black

and I'm Proud." El Vez, accompanied by a large, enthusiastic group of first-time back-up singers from, as the liner notes tell us, Elena Prieto's class at Cheremoya Elementary School, sings:

Say it loud! I'm brown and I'm proud!

*Some say we got a lot of malice
Some say we got a lot of nerve
I say we won't quit until we get what we deserve
We been 'buked and we've been scorned
We call it maize, while you're still calling it corn
Just as sure as it takes two to make the masa
This one's going out for, for LA RAZA!*

*I've worked all day with my hands and my feet
And all the time we're running from some governor named Pete
187 tried to keep us down
That won't happen just because I'm brown*

*Say it loud! I'm brown and I'm proud!
Ooooooeee, the Mexican in me! Que pasa! LA RAZA!
Ooooooeee, the Mexican in me!
Say it loud! I'm brown and I'm proud!*

*Now we demand a chance for better, higher education
We're tired of being in our homeland with this feeling of alienation
Now we are people too, we like the birds and bees
But we'd rather die on our feet
Than keep living on our knees!*

*It's now or never, hear what I say, and you can do it the El Vez way
So love me tender, so love me long, why can't we all just get along?*

Say it loud! I'm brown and I'm proud!

El Vez graciously agreed to talk to me in West Hollywood the morning before he was leaving for, of all places, Memphis, Tennessee. To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the death of the King he was performing at a conference dedicated to Elvis and popular culture. He was still searching for another Elvette to come along. If only I could sing....

López began his career as El Vez while working as a curator at a gallery in Los Angeles. The former singer for the seminal L.A. punk band the Zeros, López had temporarily put music on hold for art when his life took a surprising turn and he was forced to confront the Elvis he says is part of all of us.

Susan Larson: How and why did you acquire the Elvis persona?

Robert López: I used to run an art gallery called La Luz de Jesús and I curated a show on Elvis. We were showing the work of folk artists like the Reverend Howard Finster and others. At the opening we had an Elvis impersonator, but he wasn't very good, and I thought, "I could do *that*; I could be El Vez, the Mexican Elvis," so every day, with the Elvis music, some videos, we would show screenings of independent films on Elvis, and half-way through, I thought, "at the end of this month, either I'm going to hate Elvis, or I'm going to go all the way." Some friends of mine said the place to go was Memphis, for the anniversary of Elvis's death, August 16th, and I dared myself to go there. I said, "I can make a fool of myself, I don't know anyone there, so it's OK." Someone gave me a number, I pretended that I was an agent booking El Vez, and they said, "Oh, yeah, we've heard of him." They hadn't, of course, because I'd never done it before. I rewrote some of the words on the plane, practiced once in my hotel room, they gave me a band, I wore gold lamé pants and a gold sombrero, a jacket covered with Elvis buttons, so I made a splash. It went over so well that by the time I got back to Los Angeles it was already in the *L.A. Times*.

SL: When was this?

RL: This was a while ago, this was in '89. Then the first thing I did was for national television, a show called *2 Hip 4 TV*, it was a Saturday afternoon kid's show, and so I got to go national before I had done anything, really, and it just kind of snowballed from there. The first three years I was doing karaoke tapes when I was still running the gallery, then I used different bands in different cities and then I got my own band.

SL: Visually, when I go to your shows, you've got the over-the-top series of Elvis costumes, you've all the glam and kitsch you can muster, you're surrounded by images of the Mexican flag and United Farm Worker

banners. You sound like a combination of American popular music, traditional Mexican music and punk with some references to goofy, obscure 80s songs I can barely remember. Did I leave anything out? So, my question is, what's your attitude towards these cultural, social and political influences? Are you taking them on? Are you paying homage to them? Are you doing both at once? The effect on the audience is chaotic, confusing, but very exciting, exhilarating. It takes a lot out of a person, mentally and physically.

RL: I don't think you can do what I do unless you love and admire Elvis. I think that's what it is, I think a lot of different people like all kinds of things nowadays, musically. I think musicians try to give everything a twist now, because although their parents listen to Dionne Warwick or something they can't just do it straight, they have to punk it, or super-slow it, or mess with it somehow and I think that with me, I just can't do it straight, I have to mess with it somehow, you know, to show that I like them. I don't cherish them, I could go both ways.

SL: They're not sacred.

RL: Yeah, they're not sacred. That doesn't mean I don't respect them, or care about them. I try to blur that line between what is sacred and what is profane.

SL: What kind of people tend to listen to your music?

RL: All different kinds, that's the thing I like. I mean, I'll go to play somewhere and there will be 50-year-old women with their daughters. I was in a club once and a twenty-year-old girl yelled out, "Oh, I love you, and my Mom does, too." There'll be yuppie types, or hipsters. A lot of Elvis fans come, too. Latinos. It's just big, with a lot of different types of people, so I like that.

SL: Is there such a thing as a Chicano or Mexican-American music scene in Los Angeles?

RL: It's really funny because a couple months ago I was part of two lectures at UCLA, and there was one called "Dragging it Out," about

using drag as a way of coming “out,” El Vez being kind of that way, but there was another one that talked about “what are ‘scenes.’” Scenes are always “after the fact,” because when scenes happen it’s not like, “OK, let’s get together and I’m going to form this kind of band and you’ll be that kind of band so it’s not like we’re working together. There are a bunch of bands that are Chicano and there’s a Rock en Español scene, but there’s not, I don’t feel like I’m a part of it. There’s no real organization. There’s one guy putting out some shows which is kind of good to get some bands together.

SL: Are there places where people tend to respond better to your music than others?

RL: In the Southwest I really like to tour a lot just because the Chicano influences are well understood by the Latinos that come out. In Europe we do really well. In England we do *really* well. We do well everywhere we go, so that’s really nice.

SL: In Spain?

RL: Spain was really good, it was really nice. The first time we went there all the publicity pictures of me were of me dressed up as a conquistador saying, “El Vez Conquers Spain from Mexico.” I kind of reversed it, and they loved that. It was real funny because before we left for Spain we were in Salzburg, Austria and this Spaniard came up to me after the show was over and one of the songs that night was “Never Been to Spain,” and he said, “You better not say that in Spain, people will really get upset, I mean, people will shoot you for that, you really shouldn’t do that, you really shouldn’t.” And then when we were there, the kids would shout “yea” every time the Mexican flag would be waved. They went crazy. They really liked it. So, it’s a nice thing. People like what we do for different reasons. I mean, in Europe, I always feel slightly removed, even though most of the people there speak English, they still don’t get everything. There are always some people coming up and saying, “well, they don’t understand it but I get it.” One of the best experiences I’ve had was in Berlin. A Turkish kid came up and said, “I love your song ‘Immigration Time’ because it’s about us.” The whole thing is from a Latino Southern California perspective so though it’s so far away, they can apply it to their lives. Usually in Germany the Turkish are like the Mexicans coming

in, the immigrants and stuff like that, so it's a nice thing that they can take it and apply it to their lives. We were in Slovenia, and these Croatian kids could really relate to what we were doing. That's the whole idea. People are always coming up and saying, "I love that song" because it applies to their immigrant grandmother, even if they're Irish, Jewish, or whatever. I think kind of a nice thing, an ironic thing, is everyone feels proud to be Mexican at the end of the show even though they're not. I think there's just a sense of pride in their individuality. Individuality but unity too, at the same time.

SL: Are you going to start a revolution? You've already written the soundtrack. Do you consider yourself a political revolutionary?

RL: People have asked that before, and I don't. I think I'd rather plant the seed rather than actually do it. Coming to my shows people get very involved, I hope it's more than just buying a T-shirt. I don't want to do it myself because I don't have the answers, I'm just posing the questions.

SL: So many of your songs have lyrics that read like history lessons. Most contain strong, clear, radical messages. I know of several teachers, including myself, who use your music to teach history and Mexican-American culture.

RL: It's the same idea, learning about the future from the past. The media is so fast now, the question is, where do you apply it? It's up to you, it's not just something that just happened. Or is it? Is it just a fad or is it just pop culture? I'd like to imagine the idea of a revolution. I mean, it goes in cycles. One revolution doesn't hit and then you're done for the rest of your life. It's going to happen again and again so it's a continuous cycle of change, rearranging, development, rearranging again so it's constant and people shouldn't be apathetic and they should make a difference, be aware and do that little extra bit. Then the question is, how far do you actually go? I mean, do you actually go to Chiapas, are you really going to kill somebody?

SL: At a time when most young people think César Chávez is a boxer, do you ever feel a sense of responsibility as a performer? And to whom, exactly?

RL: I do have an agenda, and that's to get information out, to make people aware, but then again, you have to remember where we are, we're in a nightclub, drinking, it's a big party. It's also because impersonators are like the jesters of society, no-one takes us too seriously, and in addition to that I'm Mexican. I'm like the messenger, you wouldn't expect me to be saying what I am, and it's like, OK, now I'm going to tell you about social injustice and the plight of the work force in America so it's like a real contradiction and I like that because some people probably just come to look at the girls, but in a subversive way, I like the idea that they come to hear an Elvis song and they have to think, "Oh, there are other words," so it's like a little terrorist version.

SL: Do you think music can change the world?

RL: It changes my world. I love music and it means so much to me and so many of my memories. It takes me so many places. Music is the way I communicate.

SL: Where are you from? I've heard you're from several different places.

RL: I'm from Chula Vista [California]. I like that too, for a while people were saying that I was from Albuquerque, there were rumors that I was from San Diego, which is really nice, because sometimes, wherever I am, I get embraced as the hometown boy, like "he's with us," you know, which is a nice feeling. There were rumors I was dead, for a while. I like that, how that happens.

SL: When did you start to perform?

RL: When I was a kid I was in a punk rock band, a band called The Zeros and that was pretty neat because we lived near San Diego. We'd go to high school, drive all the way to L.A. and play at the Whiskey-a-Go-Go, we played with bands like Devo, then went back to school the next day, come back the next night ... that was pretty exciting for a kid. I really liked punk rock, it was wonderful for me because I really felt a part of something, a movement for lack of a better word, to get involved in something. It was a vital time for music and it was exciting and at first it was really easy because you could be techno, or you could be goth, or you could be punk, now it's really no big deal but there used to be this us-

against-the-world feeling, which was kind of nice. The first time we got together to go to Spain, with the Zeros...

SL: When was that?

RL: Well we started playing in '77 when I was 14 or 15 but two years ago, we got back together again, to do a tour of Spain, Sweden, Germany, with Mudhoney and some other people. Anyway, when I was 16 I wrote a song called "Rico Amor" and they had a tape of it all the way in Valencia and they had built a nightclub with a neon sign that said "Rico Amor," they had T-shirts, postcards, everything just because they loved my song so much, so it was kind of nice to be appreciated so far away.

SL: You're doing very well now, but was it hard to get the initial attention of record labels? Did they know what to do with you?

RL: I always work with the independents and the independents can't afford to do media pushes like other venues and stuff like that but the nice thing is that I know bands that are signed to Verge and Epitaph and I tour more than them, I bring home more money than them, so it's kind of nice in the sense that although I'm not a major, you know, I don't get big publicity articles, which would be nice, but you know we do pretty good with the media and stuff. I'm not so interested in the majors because if they read about me on a piece of paper, they just see me, El Vez, as a big joke, and you really need to see the show to see the whole potential. They work a lot with publishing and ideas and stuff like that and think, "OK, these are the songs coming out, how can we make a buck out of that?" But I mean it doesn't bother me that much. I mean, I would like major support to do things to the extent that I would like but I know I do better than a lot of my friends who are on big labels so I don't feel that bad.

SL: What are you working on now?

RL: It's a new gospel show. We're really proud of it, it's gospel and it's like, luckily I get to call it a work in progress because it's still evolving but when it's done it'll be like a Judeo-Christian, santería, subconscious, Zen Buddhist, Jewish, Aztec sacrifice, a mixture of all this stuff.

SL: Is there a Robert López who writes music El Vez can't perform? Do you ever think about ditching the whole El Vez thing and doing something else musically?

RL: I have another character named Raúl Raúl. He's a kind of Chicano Jack Kerouac/Henry Rollins Beat poet. I have a whole character based on Raúl Raúl, kind of an angry young man, some of it is spoken word and some of it we put to music, and it's more angry, as opposed to El Vez's more optimistic character. He's really Lenny Bruce in a way so I really like doing that and I'm going to do an album soon. The nice thing is that I think I can always go back to El Vez. Because of the way it works I could be an old man working in Branson and I could be, because of the Liberace quality of it all, still successful.

SL: Is it a bit confining at times to have to stick with the Elvis get-up?

RL: Yeah, well, other entertainers have to stay where they are, but I can go anywhere, because I can make it all click back, so I don't feel confined that way. I do get bored really easily, especially on a tour, because you're doing the show over and over and over. I used to try to change it every night but it was too tough on the band, they couldn't keep on top of everything, so it's like, the show would get better if you did it the same way every night. I had this thing where, "what if someone's in the audience and they've already seen the show?" I hated that idea. That's when I get my best ideas, on the road, when I think, "I just don't want to do this any more, this is it." I get inspired by what's happening to me.

SL: When you jump on stage, your presence is so high-energy, you start singing about racism and discrimination and all the white people look around a little nervously and wonder what to do. Most of them think, "what the hell" and sing and dance along.

RL: Last summer we were playing a really crowded show in Holland. All these white kids, young, with no shirts on, I mean they looked like they were all from Iowa or something, they were all singing out loud, "I'm brown and I'm proud." I really liked that "Rock and Revolution" show because with all the music at the beginning, and the noise, the sirens, and the banners, because the whole idea is that, the Chicano culture chose the symbols of the worst oppressors and the question is, is that

what you want to become? When does pride become nationalistic? I'm allowed to say I'm brown and I'm proud but you're not allowed to say you're white and you're proud because that would be racist. When does it become fascist?

SL: At the beginning of your "Rock and Revolution" show a very sinister voice came over the speakers to warn the audience not to confuse the Chicano power banners, the Mexican flag and the UFW eagle with any fascist ideology. It was eery.

RL: The first time we did it in Europe we did it in Hamburg. Not that many reporters commented on that, I was a little surprised. We played in a beautiful old theater. We had it synchronized so they all came down at the same time, the flag and the banners. The light guy was standing next to my sister who was controlling something else and they heard people gasp and say, "Ooooh, dat iz beautiful" because it evoked such an image. Some people got upset, saying, "you can't do that," afraid the images would be misunderstood. It's really funny, the whole thing about the rock and roll atmosphere, I could easily turn it ugly and say, "I hate the White devil slave master and everyone here," and get more security guards. Rock shows can be used for good and they can be used for evil. When does everyone shouting "hey" together turn into a riot? Do they understand what we're doing or not? We played in a small restaurant in Memphis once and one guy spilled his drink on me and said, "all we need is another uppity Mexican" and stormed out. We played another show in Carmel as a part of some series where there were season ticket holders and most of the series were things like opera, the Johann Sebastian Bach quartet, the Ukranian Bolshevik singers, stuff like that, and then us. We had Zapatistas come down through the audience through the aisles. Some people got really mad. They thought they were real guns, they were offended that the show supposedly wasn't what it was advertised to be, they thought it was too political, that it did Elvis an injustice. They wanted their money back. One person said they were calling the FBI because I was just trying to incite trouble and dissidence. Out of about 700 people only about 40 walked out, though, and we got a standing ovation at the end. They didn't quite know how to take it, but by the end they figured it out. We always win them over in the end. Once we played in Las Vegas in a lounge and the people in the audience were older folks, punk kids, Mexicans, all kinds of people. Some people from bands in Las Vegas came up afterwards and said that they can't even sing about the stuff we

sing about in a night club, in a rock and roll setting, without getting into trouble, and we're doing it in a lounge. We can sing about things like safe sex and Chiapas and get away with it. The audience can be in a lounge, where they don't expect to hear this stuff at all, and they're loving it and taking it all in. That's the last place in the world you'd expect to get that kind of message, in Las Vegas. But everyone in the world goes there. Everyone will take the idea from there, the record, the CD, the T-shirt, and pass it on. I like to pass the information on from the most unlikely area in the most unlikely way, it's a good way to do it.

A special thanks goes to Matthew Sullivan for his help setting up the interview. Robert López and Big Pop Records gave us permission to reprint the song lyrics.