

TRIBUTE TO ABRAHAM CHAVEZ JR.

by Conrey Bryson

The Rio Grande, nearly dry at this season, forms a bold blue line on the map, separating two nations, peoples and cultures. Often it divides them, but on some precious occasions, it unites them. Tonight, we invite you to look back to the 1930s, when El Paso was emerging from the depression. An 11-year-old boy, his violin case in hand, would board a streetcar on Saturday mornings on Alameda Avenue. The streetcar would often be crowded with soldiers from Fort Bliss who learned that, for a few dimes, the boy could be induced to open the violin case and play some wondrous music. He would ride downtown, transfer to the Juárez streetcar, and ride across the Rio Grande to receive his weekly violin lesson from Professor Diéguez. At the bridge, immigration inspectors would ask the usual questions, then would ask the boy to prove that he was really a violinist. His music became a key that brightened the daily toils of these men, and formed a mystic bridge that is still a bond between neighbor nations. That 11-year-old boy was Abraham Chávez Jr.

He was born in El Paso on March 6, 1927, in a tenement house on South Stanton Street, the last house before you came to the river. It was long ago torn down when the river was moved northward to settle the Chamizal dispute.

When was Abraham first interested in music? His mother thought it was before he was born, and his recognizable gift for music developed early. Abraham remembers but dimly the early years in El Paso. His father, having difficulty finding employment in the United States, moved to Ciudad Juárez in order to provide for his family. Times were hard, but young Abraham could not be called "underprivileged"; he was most privileged by having devoted parents who loved him and cared about his future.

Abraham Chávez Sr. was an untrained but gifted musician. He loved the company of musicians, and often instrumentalists from Juarez cabarets and restaurants would gather at the Chávez home to play informally after their work was done. Night after night, the boy would be lulled to sleep by the sounds of good music. Sometimes the men would leave their instruments there, and early in the morning, the awakening 3-year-old Abraham would try to make sounds with them. Mrs. Chávez found herself telling her husband, "Would you believe it? Our little boy can play! He can make music!"

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Unbelieving, the father listened. Yes—the boy could make music! “If you can make so much music with one finger,” he suggested, “let me show you how to use all four. Then, instead of just one string, you can use all four.”

The next step was to get the boy his first violin, made just the right size by a good Juárez carpenter. It served him until he grew large enough for a full-size instrument. Tonight we celebrate the 50th anniversary of that little boy’s first performance on a violin, at the age of 4, using an instrument fashioned with great care by a Juárez craftsman, tuned with superb skill by a loving father. Characteristically, he gave away that violin years ago, to a boy who could not afford his first violin.

Mr. and Mrs. Chávez decided to move back to the United States in order to give their children the best education possible. Because he had a prospering business, this meant tremendous financial sacrifice. Much of his property would be confiscated, and he would have few prospects of employment in El Paso, with only money enough to buy a modest home.

The next few years were difficult but happy. The father and son would go from restaurant to restaurant and bar to bar, playing music for 10 cents a tune, from a list of 600. Patrons could select from the list what they wanted to hear—waltzes, mazurkas, tangos, two-steps, ballads—for a dime and an occasional treat of Coca Cola.

Every day young Abraham was polishing his skills. He took lessons in Juárez from a wonderful teacher, Edmundo J. Diéguez, who, lacking formal training himself, had developed his skills sufficiently to compose a violin concerto and a symphony. In later years, his apt pupil had the pleasure of conducting that symphony at a concert in Juárez.

Abraham outgrew his small violin, secured another at great sacrifice, and began studies with a new teacher, Robert Semoñ, violinist with the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. At age 13, Abraham Chávez Jr. was accepted as a violinist with that same orchestra. He had entered a new world of music, and seized every opportunity to gain more knowledge and sharpen his skills. While a student at El Paso High School, he was invited to teach band and orchestra at Dudley School.

During his senior year in high school, as a member of the Student Council, he brought together eight public and parochial high schools into what was called an “eight-ball concert,” with each school bringing its own musical organization to present a mass concert and dance. Each school had a princess, and the one from St. Joseph’s Academy was lovely Lucy Villegas. Before the year was out, on November 18, 1945, she and Abraham were married. For 36 years she has shared his struggles and his successes, along with their four children, two of whom are musicians.

In that same year, the 18-year-old high school graduate accepted a position as music director at Ysleta High School, instructing the band, orchestra, drum corps and choir. He thus laid a solid foundation for a life-long career as teacher and leader in the boundless realm of music.

After a semester at Ysleta High, Abraham was called into military service. The war had just ended. Gen. G. Ralph Meyer, who had followed young Chávez' career with great interest in El Paso, suggested him for director of the Army Ground Forces Orchestra and Chorus, which later became the United States Field Forces Band. Along with the Army, Navy and Marine Bands, this organization toured much of the country, presenting entertainment to encourage the purchase of government savings bonds. The venture was highly successful and gave young Chávez valuable experience.

Two years later, back in civilian life, he resumed his place in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra and a busy schedule of teaching private lessons. During this period, El Pasoans could hear some excellent music on KTSM Radio, and we who were there still remember with affection the Strings of Melody with Ruth Lewis, Robert Semon, Russell Barrett and Abraham Chávez.

In 1949, at age 22, Chávez became concertmaster of the El Paso Symphony. He still felt the need of more formal training and enrolled at Texas Western College, now the University of Texas at El Paso. As both student and teacher, he had a fruitful career at the college and received his degree in music in 1959.

His career took a new turn in 1961 when Dr. E.A. Thormodsgaard, chairman of the college's Music Department, introduced him to Warner Imig, dean of the College of Music at the University of Colorado. As a result, Abraham spent the next five summers as a visiting lecturer in music at that university. Much as he loved El Paso, he was made an offer in 1966 that he could not refuse. He was given a full professorship, with tenure, at the University of Colorado, and was made a member of the Executive Committee of the College of Music and head of the string and orchestra department.

The next eight years found Abraham Chávez a name honored in musical circles throughout the West. He was elected president of the Colorado-Wyoming String Teachers Association, was in yearly demand as guest conductor for all-state, all-region and all-city orchestras in several states, and was invited seven times to conduct the New Mexico All-State Orchestra. Similar appearances were made in San Antonio, Dallas, cities in Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming, and at the Golden Spike Memorial Concert in Utah. A respected and loved teacher, he was chosen by students of the University of Colorado to receive the Thomas

Jefferson award, given to the teacher who best exemplified and promoted the democratic ideals of Thomas Jefferson.

These were golden years, but the Chávez family was yearning for golden sunshine. Lucy insists there were 29 snowstorms in one year. She counted every one!

As its 1974 season approached, the El Paso Symphony Orchestra was facing a crisis. Its longtime director, Orlando Barera, had died. His successor had resigned. The board decided to bring in eight different directors for the eight-concert season.

The first performance of the year was a memorable event, the opening one for the new Civic Center Theater. The man chosen to conduct, Abraham Chávez Jr., was given a fitting welcome in his home town. He achieved an artistic and personal triumph, and was recalled to the stage again and again in a testimony of appreciation.

As far as the symphony board was concerned, its search was ended, if the position could be made sufficiently attractive to lure Chávez away from Colorado. Negotiations were opened whereby he could return to the University of Texas at El Paso as professor and director of instrumental music, and also take the position of musical director of the symphony. Fortunately for us all, he accepted.

His seventh season as director is now under way. I asked him how he would summarize his efforts. His quick reply was: "Take the music to the people." This he has done in many ways. He instituted the summer concerts, unfortunately eliminated in this lean year of 1981. He restored the El Paso Youth Symphony, many of whose graduates are now members of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. There would be many more, he says, if El Paso's financial support for music were great enough to keep more of the best students here.

You have to find musicians where they are, and bring them to the world's finest music. The El Paso Symphony, under Chávez' direction, has performed with rock and roll groups, country and western singers, and stage bands. It has integrated its performances with ballet, with mime performers, and with mariachis. As community support has increased, the Symphony last year, celebrating its 50th anniversary, inaugurated a new program, performing each of its concerts on two successive nights. This was an approach to becoming a full-time professional orchestra. Achieving that goal will require much more community support, but we are well on our way, and the name, character, and skills of Abraham Chávez Jr. constitute a major force in that progress.

His home town has honored him in many ways. He was named the outstanding ex-student of El Paso High School, received the Rotary Club Achievement Award and the City of El Paso Conquistador Award.



Abraham Chavez Jr., left, was honored as the living recipient of the Hall of Honor distinction. His award was presented by Society president Gertrude Goodman, with the tribute by Conrey Bryson.

(Photo by Frank Hunter Jr.)

The League of United Latin American citizens named him its outstanding citizen, and the MacDowell Club and the El Paso Music Teachers Association gave him awards of merit.

History, if it is to be more than an interesting pastime, must look to our future as well as our past. It is with utmost confidence in many grand and glorious accomplishments yet to come in the bright career of Abraham Chávez Jr.—and in the lives of the many young boys and girls brought into the world of music to follow the road he has charted—that we proudly inscribe his name on the roll of the El Paso Hall of Honor.