

Immigrants, A River, El Weddo



THE REFRIGERATOR

“The woods are full of wardens...”

Jack Kerouac



There is a great deal of anxiety and arguing about what to do with our good neighbors to the south. Before you begin this next chapter, let me explain two important things:

Side 1: Mexico is a great nation of fabulous resources but for the last century they have been unable to provide a home that makes its own people want to stay in their own country. I'm not being critical, it's simply truth. America is a nation of “no trespassing” signs and we happen to have a legal one along our borders. There is nothing unfair or inappropriate to expect Mexico to pay for the return of their own citizens who are here illegally.

Side 2: I lived along the Mexican border for a while and I know for a fact that most people who come across to America are not “criminals,” they are hungry and poor, they are women and children, they are young men desperately looking for a job so they can send money back home to their families. They are good people with good heart and there's no reason for a “better nation,” a wealthier nation, a nation of perceived morals not to treat them with care, respect, tenderness and compassion. Return them home, I suppose, is the legal thing to do ... but at least show them how to come back the right way.

Having said that, here is a chapter from my first book, *WoodSongs I*, that I have modified and edited. It's about my experience living along the border in Laredo, Texas and seeing, for the first time, the human tragedy and heartbreak of families coming to America in search of a better life. It might be more relevant today than when I first wrote it:



Yes, a young me on the air along the Mexican border at KLAR-AM in Laredo, Texas. My house was a five minute walk to the Rio Grande River

After I graduated from high school in upstate New York, I moved to the Mexican border to start a radio gig in Laredo, Texas.

It happened as oddly as you can imagine ... living in my step father's house after high-school I got a call late one night from a friend.

"Dude, you want to be a DJ?"

"Sure, dude."

That was it.

The next day I loaded up my little Toyota with 300,000 miles on it a drove non-stop to a town along the Mexican border, 44 hours straight because it had a bad starter and if I stopped the car, well ... but this is what you do when you are young, stupid and immortal.

Thus began my brief radio career at KLAR-AM aznd a series of jolting culture shocks that my virginal young brain had to process.

Keep in mind, I grew up along the mighty Hudson River in New York, a powerful, beautiful body of water nearly a mile wide where I lived. Now, here I am heading to the Rio Grande River, the

legendary river of movies, cowboy heroes and books I read as a kid.

Wow, the mighty Rio Grande!

... turned out to be a freeking creek.

Literally.

All the stories about I heard about Mexicans swimming across the Rio for America ... dude, you can walk across the thing.

That was my first culture shock, with more to come.

There is nothing on earth more dangerous than a nervous, nineteen year old DJ who's recently crossed cultures. And trust me, going from upstate New York to the Mexican border in south Texas is indeed crossing cultures. On the air, I had all the etiquette of a bull in a china shop. I was making mistakes left and right, mostly in a desperate attempt to "fit in." Let's face it, I was scared. My problem was that I was still so geeky that I didn't realize my faux pas until it was way too late.

Like Appalachia, south Texas along the Mexican border has its own diverse culture with a rainbow of contrasts. Where east Kentucky culture is shaped by the mountains, Laredo is in the center of a desert basin. As far as you can see, it's flat. I'm talking flatter than a folksinger's wallet. Which makes trying to drive 55 MPH on Texas hiways virtually impossible. Texans are famous for cruising 100 miles per hour or faster without blinking. This is mainly because of the tremendous distances between towns, tied together by long flat black highways so hot that they look wet as you drive over them.

The people along the border are as sweet and humble as could be. It isn't uncommon to stroll down a road in Laredo, passing small homes and shanties just to come upon a big mansion stuck in the middle of it all. Poor and rich, white and Spanish...and me. All mixed up together like a big, hot breakfast omelette.

Folks in this area also have an uncanny ability to speak two languages...at once. They call it TexMex, and the habit would keep me completely confused all the time. They would actually merge the Spanish and English languages together. I mean, a guy would be searching for his pickup in a parking lot somewhere and he would say something like: "*Donde esta my truck?*"

Being on the radio in that dual-language town was quite an experience. The station I worked for had as diverse a music playlist as I've ever experienced, before or since. We would play a popular old Perry Como hit, then a Donna Summer disco record, followed by

a Henry Mancini instrumental, followed by a John Denver song, followed by a José José record from Mexico.

The funniest thing that ever happened to me in that town occurred while I was on the air late at night. And the only reason it happened at all, as I said before, was because I was a geeky kid trying too hard to fit in.

You see, ever since I had moved into town, I kept hearing one certain verbal expression over and over. A housewife would be surprised by a sudden breeze that would blow her laundry off a clothesline, and she would say “*Chinga!*” A young boy would stub his toe or bang his knee, he would say “*Chinga!*” A worker would hit his thumb with a hammer and yell, “*Chinga!*”

This term was so common, and used in such a broad, general way, I figured it must be similar to saying “gosh” or “rats” or “Oh, brother” and expressions like that.

You know, “*Gosh, my clothes fell off the clothesline,*” etc.

So, I’m on the air one night, finishing up my board shift early in the morning, the record ends, and I’ve got 10 seconds to fill before the network news feed.

Here’s what I said,

“Well, Chinga, folks...my record is ending. This is Michael Johnathon and I’ll see you again tomorrow ... it’s news time.”

Pretty normal radio talk.

Except the phone lit up like a Christmas tree in December, the engineer spilled his coffee and the secretary shrieked in the outer office.

I was still in the broadcast booth sorting out my papers when the next DJ to go on the air came walking in shaking his head, followed by the general manager of the station. The GM carried a book titled *Learn to Speak Spanish* and handed it to me.

“Look up Chinga,” he says.

So, I look up Chinga.

It means, basically ... “*f**k you*”.

Well, I couldn’t believe it.

Here I am, a nervous New York kid, and I just cussed out the south Texas listening population without even realizing it. I did the only thing I could do under the circumstances. I walked into the station the next day, hung my head high, and apologized on the air.

And my music education continued.

The music of the area is as colorful as the people who live there. Mariachi bands are in every restaurant and on every street corner. These are groups of strolling musicians, neighborhood groups mostly, that play traditional Mexican music with acoustic guitars, fiddles, horns and oversize acoustic bass guitar instruments. The music has a bouncy, happy feel to it. I can't help wanting to cook out every time I hear it.

That's because "cooking out" was and is a Texas passion. If I'm not mistaken, I believe it was actually the law in the state: you couldn't live there unless you knew how to grill fajitas on a mesquite wood fire. Violators were forced to eat at McDonalds.

The main industry in the area, of course, was oil. The major by-product from all that industrial rigging and drilling, aside from jobs for thousands of local folks, was the one critical item needed to create the worlds best barbecue grill:

An empty 55 gallon metal oil drum.

One of these drums, a couple of hinges, a steel grating for a grill and a blow torch are all the tools needed to build a barbecue cooker that is guaranteed to surpass any hardware store or WalMart brand in quality, durability and effectiveness. And once built, these suckers will outlast earthquakes, tornadoes, rainstorms and rust.

The trick to grilling on one of these is to do it like a Texan. Preparing to cook out in Laredo was almost a spiritual experience, and they can broil a steak fit for a God. As a matter of fact, according to Texas legend, God used to live in Texas ... until northerners moved in, of course.

The key to a good Texas grilled steak isn't in the meat.

No, no, no.

It's in the *wood* and *what you do to it before you start to cook out*. And you don't necessarily need the Texas oil drum cooker, either. Any barbecue grill with a cover will come fairly close.

You need mesquite wood chunks, mesquite wood chips, onions, the steaks (pork, ribs, fish, chicken... whatever!) and salt.

Here's what you do-

First, soak a few fist fulls of mesquite chips in a small bucket of water for about an hour. Then, clean out your grill from the previous barbecue, because a good fire needs to breath properly. Then, on the bottom of the grill build a pyramid with the mesquite wood chunks, NOT CHARCOAL. Compared to mesquite wood, charcoal *sucks*. This wood, available in plenty in south Texas, is a

hard dense creation that burns hot and long. Fortunately, it's readily available in most parts of the country in plastic bags at hardware stores, etc. I'm talking about 2-3" wood chunks here, not chips. If you can't find mesquite in your area, you can substitute hickory.

Once the mesquite is lit (*this might take some time to do for the inexperienced, but worth the effort*) let the wood burn down to hot coals and spread them across the bottom of the grill.

Now, cut up some onions, skins and all, and layer the top of the hot coals with it. Just smell that hot onion steam begin to waft into the air! After that, layer the top of the onions with the soaked mesquite wood chips. Now, here comes that great smell of mesquite smoke mixing in with the onion steam. *Mmmmmm!* Once that is done, place the grill on top of the coals, and lay out the steaks and salt 'em up good.

Shut the cover, get a cold cervesa, and leave it alone for a while. The shape of the oil drum cooker allows the heat, mesquite smoke and onion steam to swirl around inside like a hot convection oven, actually cooking the steaks on both sides at once, while broiling the flavors deep into the meat. After a while, open the cover, turn the meat for another couple of minutes to quick broil the other side, and you're done.

Chinga, I get excited just thinkin' about it! Oops.

Nothing in this world is better than a mesquite grilled piece of fahitas, a hot flour tortilla, a cold Tecate' beer and a hammock about 7:30 on a summer evening!

Yeeehhhhaaa!

The people of the region reflect this passion in their lifestyle, their food and their music. Most folks are from humble, poor backgrounds. They work hard, laugh hard and love hard.

And they cry easily.

Most importantly, they are tied by blood, brotherhood and economics to the affairs of Mexico.

Now, I'm not a politician, nor am I by nature a political person. I really don't care to be. As a folksinger, though, I'm free to observe life and comment on my musings, political or otherwise. Maybe political is not a good word for this. I'm really talking about a sense of humanity and welfare. If that's political, then so be it. Anyway, one night, during a late radio shift in Laredo, I found my first sense of these things stirred.

You see, after the great *Chinga* episode, I was banished to

remain on the late night airwaves, otherwise known as the graveyard shift. I guess the “powers that be” decided that, if I stumbled onto any new curse words while on the air, it was better to risk offending the small, rather obnoxious late night listeners than the more proper daytime listenership, made up of many business owners who the station sold air time to.

Folks in south Texas are very forgiving, however, especially to outsiders who admit they’re an idiot... like I did. So, they gave me a nickname, “*El Weddo*,” which means The Blondie, or, more literally, The Honky.

During a newscast one night, I sat dumbfounded listening to the news director as he read on-air the story of a Mexican family found dead in the trunk of a car in the middle of the south Texas desert. It was a family of four very poor people from Mexico, who crossed the border and hitched a ride into America, heading to Dallas to find work. Evidently, the car stalled and the driver left the family locked in the trunk, hiding from the border patrol, while he went to get help. The police found the car several hours later in the middle of the hot, summer afternoon, opened the trunk and discovered the steaming, lifeless bodies of a husband, the mother and two infants.

Well, I was shocked and it broke my heart.

I started to ask some questions, and learned that what happened to that family was certainly not uncommon. People who cross the border are usually poor folks who are just trying to feed their families by coming to America for work. There is a nickname for them...*wetbacks*. The United States Border Patrol’s job is to prevent these people from crossing the border, and I know for a fact that these professional men and women do a good job and try to be as humane as possible. The majority of these Mexican “wetbacks” are just scared men who have only the shirt on their backs, wet or otherwise. They aren’t armed, they aren’t dangerous. They don’t want to steal...they want to *work*.

Now, as I said, I’m not a political person, and I don’t have the answers as to whether people who cross the borders into America are criminal or not. I know they are breaking the law, but I can’t say they are hurting anyone. Exceptions? Of course. I know that they are taking jobs from Americans, but I don’t know too many Americans who want the jobs they take.

All I know is that my house was just a five minute walk from the Rio Grande river, and every night dozens of scared, mostly young

poor people would swim across, trying to make it into the desert to catch the underground ride, usually a truck or a van, into a city somewhere to find work. Many of them left families behind in Mexico, where a dollar a day was a full time wage. They would escape into the USA, work at an illegal sweat shop in Houston or Galveston for five dollars a day, keep three bucks to live on and mail two back to their families in Mexico.

Well, it seemed to me that the best solution was for Mexico to put its own affairs in order so poor people didn't *want* or *need* to come to America.

But I had no control over that.



It didn't help the seventeen year old Mexican boy, gone from home for the first time in his life, who roamed past my front door late at night on his way through the desert. I figured, "*You know, I can't solve the problem, but I can help that kid...*".

So, I bought an old refrigerator and put it outside my house next to the front porch.

Up the road from me was Garcia's Tortilla Factory. They made these delightfully fresh corn and flour tortillas. Every morning the scent of the tortilla factory baking away would drive me crazy 'till I was able to get to a restaurant for breakfast. I went to old man Garcia, a very pleasant round man who would sweat a lot, as I recall.

I made a deal with him. I told Mr. Garcia that I would mention his brand of tortillas on the air whenever I could if he would

agree to drop off a few packages of fresh tortillas and put them into that refrigerator each day. I explained to him why, and he agreed. Every night, I filled a jug with water or juice and put it in the fridge with the tortillas.

Then, I called a couple of friends of mine who worked at radio stations in Monterey and Nuevo Laredo in Mexico and told them what I was doing. They, in turn, gently and quietly let the word out.

After several days, it happened.

I was in bed early one morning. It was about 4am and still dark outside. I woke to the sound of muffled talking and the jingling of the refrigerator door opening. At daybreak, I got up and went outside to check the supplies.

They were all gone.

For the next several months, a steady stream of mostly frightened, poor young men would cross the Rio Grande river, search out El Weddo's refrigerator, load up on tortillas and juice, and then head out on their night time journey across the desert.

I remember one morning, opening the door of the empty refrigerator only to find a page from a Mexican bible that someone had torn out and left behind on the shelf. It was their only way to say "*Thank you.*"

I picked up that torn page and just stared at it, trying to picture the man who left it behind.

Who was he?

What was his story?

I pictured him to be a good man from deep inside Mexico's interior. He swam across the river in the middle of the night, his mind desperate to remember the instructions he was told for his journey into America to find work. Did he visualize his wife in his mind as he swam the shallow river? Did he carry a photo in his pocket of the children that he'd left behind in his little Mexican town in order to sneak into the US to earn the



money he needed to feed and house them? Did the image of their little faces pull him ashore once he reached the American side? Did he ache to hold them as the desert brush pricked his skin, to tuck them into bed and kiss his wife good night?

I'm sure he did.

One of the instructions he may have recalled as he swam ashore was about a place nearby where he could find some food and something cool to drink. He was told it was a safe place to come, but he probably was scared out of his mind as he arrived there because of the street light not far from my property. If he was seen, would he go to jail? He had to take the chance. He could see the refrigerator outside my door, just as he had been told, so he quietly walked onto the property.

I wonder if he thought about me a bit as he opened the door and poured a glass of grape juice and filled his pockets with fresh flour tortillas. Did he wonder who I was? What I was like? He must have, because he was moved enough to leave a small *thank you* for me by tearing a page from his tiny Mexican bible and leaving it behind.

I don't know what happened to that man, and I don't know what happened to that old refrigerator after I moved away from Laredo to Mousie, Kentucky ... but me and Mr. Garcia kept that sucker full every single day until the minute I left.

The above from the book, "WoodSongs I"



NOTE: I hope you get my point. Law is law, I get that. But Love is love, as well. The greatest nation on earth should also have the greatest principles and morals on earth.

Fair is fair, too: if you're going to forgive an illegal resident from breaking a law, then you should also forgive a good US citizen for their traffic tickets.

It's a complicated issue, yet so easy to fix: legalize drugs to crush the cartels, educate the public to crush drug use ... and instead of building a wall that anyone can tunnel under, provide a banjo for every home in America with a front porch.

It may not solve all our problems, but we will be so busy trying to tune the darn things we won't notice as much.

'nuff said