

Interview with Gilberto Perez: A South Texas Conjunto Legend's Memories of Hurricane Beulah and Recording "Las Crecientes de Beulah"

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Díana Noreen Rivera: This is an interview with Mr. Gilberto Pérez, conjunto legend from Mercedes, TX. So, the first thing I want to ask you Mr. Perez is when were you born and where were you born?

Gilberto Perez: I was born in Mercedes in the year 1935 and raised in the area. I lived in Heidelberg and then back to Mercedes. And, now I'm 4 ½ miles north of Mercedes on mile 11 ½. But, I'm still in the Mercedes area, and all of my family, my descendants and my father and mother were born in Relampago and Campacuas. They were all born in this particular area, and all of my brothers and sisters.

DNR: Do you remember what it was like growing up in Mercedes. Could you tell me what it was like growing up in the 1930s and 40s in Mercedes and El Valle?

GP: Well, like I said I was born in '35. So, actually we lived on mile 8 north of Mercedes. And at the time we just had my brothers and my dad had only just one old car, you know, we didn't get around too often, so we used to walk to Mercedes at the time.

DNR: How far of a walk was that?

GP: About a mile and half. What I remember more of Mercedes was when I was a little more grown up, about ten years old. At that time, we lived in Heidelberg. And, we used to go to town, to Mercedes every two or three weeks. We mostly stuck around the Heidelberg area because we even had a school over there, which is where I started my school back in 1942. In Heidelberg, it's off of Mile 2, now it's called Kika de la Garza highway. And, I was raised there until I got married. Like I said, I got married kind of young, I was twenty years old when I got married.

DNR: And, do you have any memories of school that really stand out to you, like a teacher or school friends, or going to football games. Is that something you all did in the 40s?

GP: Yes, well in the 40s, my memory, what goes back, I reminisce in the area of Heidelberg ... the people living in the area. Of course, there were not very many families living there at the time. But, we stick together, you know, and actually we had a baseball team there. We used to go to play with Mercedes, against them. But we were just like Relampago. They had their school over there and they stick much to their Relampago area. And Heidelberg at the time was called "la milla diez" or mile ten. Heidleberg is next to Mile 10. And my father owned a little ranch over there, a ten acre little ranch at Mile 10 and 2. So we called it "la diez." And our team was called "Los Red Calves de la diez."

DNR: Were you any good?

GP: Sometimes we won, sometimes we lost. At the time, we didn't have the facilities we have now-a-days, you know, we had just one baseball and one bat. That was everything we had. And our gloves, the bigger guys that would loan us the catcher's mitt and stuff like that so we could play. We couldn't afford buying all the stuff at the time and our school didn't have a baseball team, nor a football team. So, to go and enjoy a football team we had to go to Mercedes. At the time, I remember when Tony Ortega was the running back. He was pretty good. In '67, '66 and '68 Mercedes went all the way to play at state. They lost to West Columbia by one point. The score was 6-7. Because Vetty Zavala was the kicker, he missed the extra point. You can figure, losing by one point, and that's for State, state-wide! And, that's the most. Like I say, I remember all my friends in Heidelberg. We went to school together. But, when I got to sixth grade, in Heidelberg, we had to Mercedes. The school bus would pick us up and bring us back. It was only just one school bus, but there weren't very many people riding the bus at the time.

DNR: Did you go Travis (the name of a school in Mercedes)?

GP: No, I didn't go to Mercedes because at the time, when I was in school, in fifth grade, my family migrated to Mississippi for a couple of years as sharecroppers. So, over there, at the time, it was in 1947, there was discrimination of colored. And for Mexicanos, some places they would admit us and some don't. So, they opened up just one particular home for the sharecropper Mexicanos to go to that particular school. So I went. And, one day a jeep picked me up. I went there and the books they had there were second grade books. What I had already gone through. And, there was a substitute teacher. So, I went two days and on the third day a man came to pick me up and I told him, "I'm not going." And he said, "Why?" I said, "One reason is it's too cold, and they don't have a heater over there." It was in Winter-time, and Mississippi is a very cold state. And, then I say, "And other thing, I'm not going to learn nothing because what they're teaching me there I went through that two or three years ago." So, there's no sense going over there. And then I told him, "The first people that go back to Texas, or whenever I can afford it, I'm going to go back to Texas, and I'm going to go to school over there." One of my brothers stayed here taking care of the farm. And I'm going to go back with him. So, I did. I did. A brother of one of my sisters-in-law died here in Mercedes, one of the Almanzas. And, my other brother brought her back when he died. So, I had a ride back to Mercedes. So, I came, and I stayed, and I went to school. And, they put me back in fifth grade again because I lost part of ...

DNR: The year.

GP: So, when school was over, I catch a ride back to Mississippi, went to Arkansas, worked two weeks over there and made a enough money to catch a bus and go to Mississippi where my family was. So I spent two years in Mississippi and then when I came back I was way behind. So, I dropped out.

DNR: So, what grade were you in when you dropped out?

GP: Fifth grade. They never moved me from fifth grade. School was kind of different at that time. Like in Heidelberg, we just had one teacher.

DNR: For all the grade levels?

GP: For all the school. First, second and third grade would go in the morning until noon. And then at 12:30 would go fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. And in one day they teach six grades, just one teacher. So, it's kind of different. And it was kind of easier than it is right now ... a whole lot easier. That's how come I was an "A+" student. But, I became an "A+" drop out, too. Well, this happened for several reasons. I came from a poor family. We had to work because my mom and my dad had twelve kids. But, when I was raised there were nine of us and I was living with my father. We all had to work to survive.

DNR: What were your parents' names?

GP: My father's name was Genoveno Perez and my mother was Micaela Garcia Perez.

DNR: And, your mother and your father both work as sharecroppers in Arkansas and Mississippi?

GP: Yes, for a couple of years. And, then we came back and went back to the drawing board.

DNR: When you spoke about segregation and discrimination, was the Valley, I guess, better or worse in terms of ...

GP: Well, it was better here, because at the time the only Spanish or Mexican-American people that were there were not too many. There were very few Mexican-American people that lived over there. And, over here in the Valley there were mostly Mexicans than White people. When I went to school I was six years, going on seven years because my parents used to migrate to "las piscas del algodón" to pick cotton all the way up to Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi until it got so cold they couldn't stand it and came back. And, I also wrote a corrido about that.

DNR: Is that corrido on one of your albums?

GP: Yes, on a CD. I just wrote it and recorded it about a year ago.

DNR: Oh, okay. So, your parents saved up their money that way your father could purchase the ten acres when they moved back to down to the Rio Grande Valley. And of course the earnings were also from your brothers and sisters. It was a family effort.

GP: Cause my daddy and my older brother always farmed. We had only ten acres, but since we could, we bought a tractor. They worked with horses. But, we had to work with other bigger farmers to survive for our little farm. We used to rent some more land besides the ten acres. We rented some more land to make it.

DNR: Did you plant cotton? What kind of crops?

GP: We planted cotton and vegetables like bell pepper and eggplant, carrots, broccoli, tomatoes.

DNR: So, when you left school after fifth grade you helped on the farm full time?

GP: We worked on the farm on our own and rented land. But, sometimes me and my brother Alejandro, we worked at night with a bigger farmer, he was a Japanese who lived in Heidelberg. We worked from 7 in the evening to 7 in the morning all night long driving tractors. And that's how we could afford to buy clothing.

DNR: Do you remember the name of the Japanese farmer?

GP: John ... I don't recall his last name. It was in the late 40s.

DNR: And he had his farm out where?

GP: The farm is still there, but I don't' who runs that farm, it was the old man his father, his mother, and he was John, he was the son of them that would run the farm. They owned I don't know, maybe a 100 acres or so.

DNR: And that was here on mile 11 or 12?

GP: Mile 2. Mile 2 and 10.

DNR: Oh okay, out by the Outlet Mall.

GP: In Heidelberg. Heidelberg was on the west side of mile 2 and his farm was on the other side. They used to run a dirt canal through there.

DNR: Let's go ahead and now I want to ask you about some of your first memories of music. So, what are some of your earliest memories of music in your childhood home? Or, when you were out on the road in Mississippi, what are some of the earliest memories of music you have?

GP: Well, one thing that I start liking music when I was very young was because my older brothers all of them used to play accordion and guitar and I used to hear them sing all the time. But, at the time, one of my oldest brothers, back in 1941, well ... in 1939 he bought the first accordion a two-row accordion, and I still have it. Then, he

got drafted in World War II, in '41. So, he sold the accordion and he went to the Air Force, and we didn't have an instrument at the time. But, we used to hang around with the kids over there in Heidelberg. There was a little store over there. "La clicka" you know over there outside of the store. And, a couple of friends of mine had a couple of guitars, and I used to borrow the guitars, and I started playing a little guitar. And, Los Hermanos Flores were pretty good musicians at the time. He showed me the first chords on the guitar. Then, as I went on, finally my friends loaned me accordions, so I started playing a little. I didn't own an accordion. Then one my brothers went to California to work. When he came back he bought a two-row accordion. Then we had an accordion. That's how it started, you know.

DNR: How old were you when he brought that accordion back from California?

GP: I was fifteen years old. And like I say, my oldest brothers they all played a little bit of accordion. So, I how I learned was by watching my brothers. I couldn't just grab the accordion and play it. Because at the time, people couldn't afford instruments like today. So, they had to take pretty good care of whatever they had because they couldn't afford to buy another one. Or, if it broke or something whose going to fix it? So, I had to ask for it. And they said, "Well, you can have it, but take very good care of it. I'm going to watch you. You take good care of it. If you start roughing that little thing I'm going to take it away from you." "Okay." So. (Laughs). It was an adventure anyway.

DNR: Did you learn to play by ear listening on the radio?

GP: I used to listen on the radio, and one thing that made me keep doing this (playing the accordion) and still doing it for fifty-seven years or more is my dad. He had a lot of *como te dire*, *confiansa* in me. Because I was the youngest of the twelve my mom had. And all my brothers played a little. And he would lay on the floor listening to me play the guitar and sing, and he would say ... he called me "Chiquito" ... he'd say "Chiquito is going to be the best." Y decía les va sacar de una pata delante, which means that I was going to be better than all my brothers that played. And I always kept that in mind and it kept me going. And, I still remember my dad when he used to say that. And I'm still ... *estoy* ... *como se dice* ... how would I say it ... pleasing him that I'm doing what he wanted for me to do, and he had a lot of confidence that I would be somebody. But, I did and I'm still doing whatever I can, maybe my dad had so much confidence that he wanted for me to be more than what I did. But, I did what only I could, and I can, and I'm going to still do it until I can't.

DNR: And you did a lot.

GP: Until my good Lord says "You're done. I'm ready for you." (Laughs) I hope he says, "Come on up."

DNR: (Laughs) Playing the accordion through the gates of heaven. So, you already talked about this question. But, I was going to ask you when did you realized you

loved the accordion and loved conjunto and figured that's it I'm going to form a band and this is the career I want to pursue. When did you realize that? You said your father gave you that confidence. But, when you did you realize for yourself you wanted to make a career out of music?

GP: And also my brothers encouraged me. But, always, like you say, we listened to the radio. We listened to Narciso Martinez and Valerio Longoria and all those big guys at the time, you know, and ever since I loved the accordion music and conjunto, especially conjunto because that's how I was grown. The reason ... Mr. Ruben Vela, he had a conjunto in the 50s and back in '58 and '59 he asked me to play for him. He wanted ... it was the time of the Rock 'n Roll era ... and I used to sing a little Rock N Roll, also.

DNR: So, you had Narciso Martinez as one of your influences, but from the other side of things Elvis Presley ...

GP: Right, Elvis was my favorite, you know.

DNR: Or, Buddy Holly?

GP: I guess, everybody else, Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent, and all those guys, Chuck Berry and Fats Domino and all those guys in the 50s you know. And I like to sing that, and especially Western. So, it's how I went with Ruben Vela. And, I used to play guitar at the time. I bought a used guitar that used to be owned by Freddy Fender. A guy from La Villita hall in San Benito had it for sale over there. So he kept the guitar. And I bought it. Well, a lady from the State Theater in Mercedes, (we used to have a group that was named the Red Rockers in Mercedes) the lady was Mrs. Dunbar. She bought, she paid for that guitar for me to have a guitar so we could sing. The State Theater was English, and the Rex Theater, and the Rio Triato was Spanish. So, we started playing Rock N Roll at the Spanish Theater and Mrs. Dunbar found out and said, "I want you guys to come play for me, too." "I'll pay you guys." We didn't get much, but it paid a little. And I said, "Well, I need a guitar." "How much is a guitar." "\$40 dollars." She gave me the \$40. "Well go and get it" I made a mistake of selling that guitar because it would be worth a lot of money now, because it was Freddy Fender's guitar.

DNR: Where did you buy the guitar? From what music shop?

GP: I bought it from Fernando Sanchez from La Villita and dance hall from San Benito. Because Freddy Fender, he was called the Bebop Kid at the time, he used to go and sing at La Villita. Fernando, that's where I, that's how I got it.

DNR: So Mrs. Dunbar let your group at the time, the Red Rockers, perform at her Theater, the State Theater, on Texas Blvd.

GP: Yes, right, and then some other theaters found out that there was a Rock N Roll group in the area. And we used to play in Weslaco also and Elsa and we played at Brownsville also.

DNR: And, you played during the intermission, or before or after?

GP: Well, when we appeared in a few dances with different big bands, you know, they would put us in during the intermission just for say 25 minutes, 20 minutes, say for or five songs.

DNR: And what songs would you play?

GP: When we had the Red Rockers group I didn't do most of the lead singing, we did the humming and the stuff, you know. And Raul Garza's his name, that's Rudy Garza's son, he was the lead singer. But, he play, like you mentioned "Rock and the Clock," "Jail House Rock," all those songs that were popular at the time.

DNR: Maybe some Hank Williams?

GP: And some Hank Williams, of course.

DNR: So, no conjunto there (at the State Theater)?

GP: That country western I would do it. Mostly Hank Williams, yes.

DNR: So, mostly English songs for the intermission. Okay.

GP: Yeah, well, the group was English. Yes, it was 100%.

DNR: It was the Red Rockers. Okay, so, we're going to move to the Hurricane Beulah questions in a second. But, I wanted to ask you more of a historical question. In the 1940s and in the 1950s when you were starting out in the early years of being a musician with these groups. As you know, World War II ended in 1946, right, and our soldiers came back. Then the Korean War starts up in 1950-1953. And then, of course, there's Operation Wetback, right, when the government crack down on the braceros and the migrant workers, in 1954, Cold War of course is going on. Did any of those historical moments and events influence you as a musician? Or as an artist?

GP: Well, yes. I always, like I said, I always like to play and sing. But, we had to work all the time. As you mentioned -- the bracero program. I worked for a hundred braceros. I was el Pesa de oro, the bookkeeper at the time, you know. But, in order to remember all the names of a hundred guys, of picking cotton here with the Wade family from La Villa and Mercedes, I was called "el romanero" because I ran the scale and on Saturdays I was fifteen years at the time. But, my daddy signed so I could have a drivers license to drive a truck. So, I would do the payroll, then mi compadre, he was the main guy of the braceros, but I was his helper. And my work was to wait

during the week to keep the books of everyone. I would call them by numbers. Number one, number two ... (laughs) there were two twins that were number six and number seventeen that exactly looked alike. And on Saturdays when I did the payroll I had to drive the first bunch was for people to go to groceries, the next bunch people who go to movies, and the last bunch was the people that go to cantinas, that was the roughest one. I had to stay up until one o'clock, twelve o'clock, one o'clock and take them back to the camp that was on mile 4 going to Relampago. And that was in the late 50s and 40s. When we were the sharecroppers in '47 and '48 in Mississippi they already started the Bracero Program. They had some Braceros, but I didn't have nothing to do with it. Pero, este, there was a bunch of braceros picking cotton over there at the time. And like World War II, I didn't, my brother was in the Army when the war ended. And, I didn't get drafted I didn't go. And, we were farmers, you know, at the time of the drafting. The people that farm were the last to be drafted. Even though if some of the farmers that were drafted, if you were working for a big farmer and the big farmer said you needed him they would release him at the time. It was during the Korean War. And then, well, Vietnam and all this. I was a 4-F. (Laughs) I still have my card, my selective service card and my 4-F, which is ... you can not be called because I was married and I had a family. Maybe if I was the last resort. We didn't have know more, you know, the age they needed, if they needed more people, maybe we would have gotten drafted. But, when they first came they went by First-A, Second-A, and then they had 4-F. 4-F was the worst, well not the worst, but the last.

DNR: The last to get picked.

GP: The last for the drafting system.

DNR: Tell me about when Arnaldo Ramirez.

GP: He was Mr. Falcon

DNR: Yeah, the founder of Falcon Records. Tell me about when he signed you. Was it back in 1959? Is that when you got signed first to Falcon?

GP: Yes, the last part of 59 when we recorded our first record it was named "El Dia de Tu Boda." It was a song my compadre wrote. He was the bajo player. The reason that ... because I quit Reuben Vela because I used to go to Mississippi every year and work with a combine that I had with my brother, we were half and half with the combine. We used to thrash rice and soybeans and stuff you know, over there, oats... we worked for a while and we came back, and when I quit Reuben Vela because I had to go to Mississippi every year for at least three months. So, when I came back my compadre had about four or five songs he had written and he kept, "compadre let's go make a conjunto, let's make a conjunto" We used to get together and sing, and ... So, we went to Falcon, we didn't have a telephone at the time. So, we went to Falcon because we had recorded with Ruben Vela. I had recorded the first song I wrote, it was called "La Noche Quebré and me and my compadre used to play

together with Reuben. So, we went over there and they recognized us because we already cut two or three records with Reuben Vela. So, they admit us. They said, "Alright, we'll try you guys." So, we had all original songs. So, there was no problem to get into Falcon, which was the biggest thing around at the time. Because they had another label that was called el Bronco. They called it the cheap label, you know. They were going to try somebody out they put them on Bronco Records and if they started doing better they put them up to Falcon.

DNR: So, Bronco was like the second-string ...

GP: Right.

DNR: And Falcon was like the first-stringers. Okay. So, Ramirez, we he your promoter and your manager?

GP: No, not actually, just for the recording purpose, because ... like they used to say at the time "we record you guys, we promote you, we'll take care of the promotion, and you guys go, that's the way you get gigs playing at dances, weddings or whatever that's your part. Our part --- we're going to record you. But, they used to pay us and pay us a little to record.

DNR: But, it was up to the group to line-up your gigs?

GP: Yes.

DNR: So, weddings, quinceneras, dance halls...

GP: Yeah, and the conjuntos at the time, the groups that were going around like Tony de la Rosa, the compadre Reuben Vela, and a lot of guys you know, they didn't have a manager.

<Child Abduction Service Alert.>

DNR: Who were some the biggest fans of your music in the early days? Who were your fans when you just started out with Falcon?

GP: Well, it kinda hard because, we were pretty lucky with our first record "El Dia de Tu Boda" at the time we had about four or five stations in the is area that played conjunto music, plus Reynosa, Matamoros, Rio Bravo had a block programs for conjunto music. And at the time, the Tejano conjuntos got more airplay than any other time of music. More than Norteños. But, the nortenos at the time, when I went to Falcon Records the norteno groups from Mexico and the Tejanos, we were even as far as fans for the conjuntos. They accepted Los Alegres de Teran, they were very popular, Los Hermanos Arellano, and a lot of groups, Roberto Estrella from Mexico, La Salazar, and here they had a lot of conjuntos ... Reuben Vela, Tony de la Rosa, a lot of those guys. But, coming back, as I started to say, we were pretty happy, lucky I

mean. Our first record got a lot of airplay. So, Falcon records asked us, "You have to record more." So, they asked us because they were selling. So, we went back and our first three or four records, as soon as we put them out they were getting airplay. So, we started getting gigs and we were playing around.

DNR: So, you were getting gigs in Valley on this side of the Border?

GP: Yes.

DNR: Or, also in Reynosa and Matamoros?

GP: No, I didn't get to play on the other side, in Mexico until in the 90s. We never played. We stick around here. So, we started here in Valley, all the way to Eagle Pass, Crystal City, Carrizo Springs, Laredo, Zapata, and all the way to Brownsville. There was a lot of places at the time. And then we started going to San Antonio, Houston

DNR: The bigger cities

GP: And then we started making tours. So, I did travel around the states for about more than 25 years or so. We used to make a hit as we called them, tours for two, three, four ... I remember one tour we stayed on the road for about seven or eight weeks not coming home. And we used to come back and stick around in the area for two or three weeks and play the area. We travelled from Seattle to Michigan all the way from Miami. And, up north, from Kansas to Indiana, Ohio, Michigan.

DNR: Who paid for the gas?

GP: We got paid.

DNR: So, Falcon paid.

GP: No. We were individual at the time.

DNR: Oh, okay.

GP: The main reason was because the people from the Valley and San Antonio, South Texas, all of the people here would migrate up north to work in the fields. And, when we played in these particular areas the most crowds we had were people from the Valley or San Antonio or from all over. So, we had pretty good crowds at the time, and they were working in the fields, so we had pretty good crowds.

DNR: So, whether it was picking apples in Washington or cherries in Michigan, you went to the ...

GP: They would work them in tomatoes, and pickles, and betabel, they called them betabeles in Idaho, and in Ohio the sugarbeets, they started from when they planted and then they worked in pickles and tomatoes, and then when the sugar beet came.

DNR: How did your organize those tours?

GP: In the music?

DNR: Yeah. Who lined up all the gigs for the campesinos in the different states?

GP: The promoters over there would call us and say, "I want you to ... I'll contract you. Make a contract for so many weeks, I'll pay you so much." So the first contract I made was to Michigan. The promoter was named Juan Martinez. We did it by mail because I didn't have a telephone. I was just barely starting, but like I say we were lucky. And, so, they didn't send us a deposit at the time. It was back in '61, I think it was. So, we made a dance here at Mercedes, at La Hielera, with the lady who owned the Mer-Tex café. And we raised money for the trip, for the gas. And, there was people working in the San Antonio area, from Mercedes, and he found us a group, it was Eledia Reyna's uncle, name Ricardo Reyna, who got us a gig, and Natalia, and then I had a friend in Lubbock, Texas, he was a musician – Rey Rivera – by letter, we communicated, and he got us two or three gigs over there. So, that's how we made money to get all the way to Michigan.

DNR: You said it was in Lubbock or Laredo?

GP: In Lubbock, Texas.

DNR: Lubbock, okay.

GP: That was were we played.

DNR: And, you played in the city?

GP: In the salones.

DNR: In the salons.

GP: My friend over there was a good friend with a radio disc jockey, they had a conjunto program. So, the guy, the DJ, got us the gigs with the promoters that promoted dances at the time. We made out pretty good, I think. We made it all the way (to Michigan). But, like I say, as long as we didn't have a telephone ... our contract ... I had a brother living in Mississippi. The contract was sent to Mississippi, so I picked it up over there, and notarized it there and sent it back. So, my the time was got to Michigan ... we stayed two or three days with my brother, then went all the way to Michigan, to Flint, Michigan to play in the area.

DNR: To play for the campesinos?

GP: It was kind of hard because of the vehicle we were driving. It was an old station wagon pulling a little trailer. But, of course at the time our equipment wasn't that big, you know.

DNR: Right.

GP: It's two speakers, two mics, one amplifier for the system and then an amplifier for the bass and the guitar ... and that was it.

DNR: How did that make you feel because when you were a young boy you picked in the fields. But, here you are now going on stage playing for the campesinos?

GP: Laughs. At the time most of the crowds we drew were teenagers and young people. And, like every time we had a break, you know, an intermission, there was a lot of kids asking, "Hey! Gilberto, how does it feel to be so famous?" and like that, you know, questions like that. "How does it feel to know how to play music?" or "sing?" I had answers for them, according to their questions. But, of course we created a lot of grown-up fans because of our music that we used to play. We still get compliments now, mostly old people, they like our music because most of our songs that we had recorded along the years has meaning. And, I think that along the way I have recorded songs that has meaning for everything. And, that's one thing I like to do, sing about real life ... the true meaning of life.

DNR: Yeah, those are the songs that last.

GP: Yeah. And, I like all those types of music. But, well, most that people like, what people I still kept doing the same thing. Like sad songs like "Por Qué Dios Mio" that's about his girlfriend that died in a wreck. I sing "Por Qué Dios Mio" because the song's still being recorded over and over. "Con Cartitas" ... and still people record it over and over. And then later in the late-60s and 70s "Mi Casa Nueva" "Cuanta Corazón" a lot of songs that a lot of people have recorded and became famous and even more famous than me with people from Mexico and people from here, you know, groups from over there and groups from here. Which it's, it's okay because most of, not all, but most of the songs, the hit songs that I have were written by friends, they were not original from us. We have a lot of original songs recorded, but not all make it up to the level, like "Cartitas" or "Mi Casa Nueva" that big groups have recorded them. So, that's good for the composer.

DNR: Okay. So, we'll talk about Hurricane Beulah now.

GP: Okay.

DNR: It was a powerful storm. And I did a lot of research on Beulah to figure out how did this storm come to be. So, it started in the eastern Caribbean and then it did

a lot of damage to the Caribbean islands and people died in the Caribbean. And, then it came across the Yucatán Peninsula and there was a lot of flooding there and death. And then, of course, straight to the Valley.

GP: Straight to Brownsville. (laughs)

DNR: (Laughs) Right, well, Boca Chica, right, the mouth of the Rio Grande. Do you remember when you first heard about Beulah?

GP: Yes, at the time, when were touring it was back in 1967, we were on a tour going towards California. And, we stopped on Phoenix, Arizona. It was our first leg, we played there for two or three days and then we had to go. And, during those three days is when Beulah hit. And, we lost communication there, you know. And, so we decided to turn back because of the news and ... they, they sounded like Beulah was going to wipe the Valley, you know.

DNR: And at the point, you're a family man. Right?

GP: My family was here. And at that point we had a one-year old boy ... our youngest son. So, I told the man there (in Phoenix) "Call the guy in California. I'm going to turn back. So, we came back. We had a hard time coming back to the Valley because it was flooded.

DNR: Did you take Hwy 281 through Falfurrias? Or, were you trying to go through Hwy 77?

GP: No, through Laredo, down 83. We came through, you know, Del Rio and all the way down.

DNR: Eagle Pass.

GP: Eagle Pass, right. And all the way ... but, the worst was Rio Grande it was, it was when it was very flooded. But, they had tractors pulling on the lowest part, tractors pulling the cars or whatever across, and we finally made it. And, so, thank God my family was okay ... our families with all the guys in the group. And so, the radio started playing a corrido by Agapito Zuniga ... he was pretty popular at the time ... a corrido from Beulah ... hurricane. So, we started thinking ... well, what happened after Beulah? Las crecientes, the floodings. So, we got together and said "Let's make a corrido about the crecientes," because the crecientes was pretty bad.

DNR: I think, with Agapito's song, "Tragedia de Beulah" he starts it with wind.

GP: No, that's "Las Crecientes." Oh! Maybe Agapito did, too.

DNR: Yes, uh huh.

GP: Cause when we recorded that it was ... we made a sound of water.

DNR: Uh huh. (Shakes head.) How did you make that sound?

GP: In the restroom. (Laughs)

DNR: With the sink?

GP: With the sink. (Laughs)

DNR: Who came up with that idea?

GP: No, it was the washbowl in the restroom. The studio.

DNR: Okay. You mic'd it. (the washbowl).

GP: Because we were in the studio. And, I told **the guy that run the studio** over there in Ideal Records and Chico Records, because he was part owner, we were going to record, and we started talking about the floods. And, **he** said, "Hey, what are you doing?" I said we're going to write a tragedia, or corrido about the crecientes of Beulah. He said, "Hey, that's sounds pretty good." So, he stopped the recording session. No, you work on that. So, we stayed there all the evening, and we stayed till, I don't know, two or three o'clock in the morning. And, we left a sample there, and we wrote it. It was me and Alejandro, my brother, and my compadre Cruz Gonzalez who was the drummer, and Raul Garza who was, he was the MC, and he used to sing also with the group. My compadre Medina wasn't there at the time. When we ... he was there when we composed it, but when we went back the next day, because **he** called us and said, "Hey, come and record this because it sounds pretty good, and I have the sampler here." So, we went back and compadre didn't show up, and this guy was pushing me, saying "come on, let's do it."

DNR: He wanted to get it down.

GP: Yeah.

DNR: And who was this person again, the promoter for Ideal and Chico?

GP: The owner was Paco Betancourt, but his nephew, his name was Johnny Phillips. He was the one that run the studio and he was part owner of Ideal records. So, Johnny was the one that was, that was pushing us, you know. Because they had the record pressers over there, they'd press 45s and 78s, and albums also. So, we needed a bajo sexto, and we couldn't get nobody, so my brother said, "Yeah, I'll play the bajo sexto, just make it slow, and I'll play the bajo sexto." And then, (laughs) a guy was walking by, and Chuy Villegas was there ... he was a good accordionist friend of mine. He called this guy and said, "Hey, come over here ---Pete Bienavides-- - He said, "Do you want to play the bajo, the bass?" "Yeah, why not?" So, we made a

group right there. And, then my compadre was my second voice, he wasn't there, so Raul Garza then MC, he said, "Well, I'll do the second voice." Because at the time, we had only one mic to record everything.

DNR: So, he did back-up vocal?

GP: So, the way we'd sing, you know, the loudest was back-up. (laughs)

DNR: And, then you cut the track right there?

GP: Yes, and all together. And, if you made a mistake you had to do it all over again. You couldn't over dub. In a way, so it was Chuy Villegas playing the accordion because I was going to sing, it was a brand new song, you know. And, me and Raul sang. And, Alejandro played the bajo. And, compadre Cruz played the drums, and Pedro Bienavides played the bass. So, it's a mixed conjunto. But, we put it out as it was, not like I wanted to do it.

DNR: How would you have done it if you were allowed do it?

GP: Well, my compadre playing the bajo sexto and singing the second voice with me and I playing the accordion.

DNR: But, the man, I forget ... what was his name again?

GP: Johnny Phillips.

DNR: Right, Johnny Phillips. He wanted it that day.

GP: Yeah. And, he was right. The sooner he put it out they took it to the radio and all the radio (stations) were playing it.

DNR: And when was that? What month?

GP: It was just right after Beulah.

DNR: So, it was Agapito Zuniga who had his corrido out first.

GP: Right.

DNR: And then, why not "Crecientes," since he talks about Corpus Christi and Victoria

GP: That's how come they were pushing for that.

DNR: Let's get the Valley perspective.

GP: It's not like nowadays with cell phones to communicate. So, we couldn't communicate with Compadre Medina.

DNR: Yeah.

GP: So, cause Alejandro was the bass player, the one who played the bajo sexto. So that's how we recorded it. And, for a while ... those things that happened, you know, like that, they get airplay for just for then and people forget and here comes another hurricane.

DNR: Well, yeah... yeah...

GP: Like everything else, you know, the new pushes the old.

DNR: With "Crecientes de Beulah" you chose do it in the corrido style instead of a cancion, with a chorus and verse ... why the corrido to tell about Beulah? As you said Agapito did it in the corrido-style, too.

GP: Right. Well, it was following the Onda, like you say, le Onda de corridos. Because we figured there was going to be more corridos about Beulah. So, we played it in somewhat the style of the corrido to be in the same area, in the same Onda.

DNR: Did you write most of the lyrics.

GP: We all did. And, it wasn't too hard because of the **news we heard on the radio** and it was suddenly as if it had just happened. And, when we got back from Arizona, it was flooded, that's when **the levees got broke here in Mercedes**. So, I got to see all that. So, whatever happened we just placed it.

DNR: Right. And, then there was the mosquitos. The mosquitos didn't make it into the corrido.

GP: (Laughs) No. No mosquitos allowed. (Laughs)

DNR: No, mosquitos. It's about the crecientes. Not "Los Mosquitos de Beulah." Okay. Did you perform Las Crecientes de Beulah when you went back out on the road for the campesinos?

GP: At the beginning yeah. The ... recently ... for maybe six months or so, they asked for it, you know.

DNR: The campesinos?

GP: Like in the area of Alice and Laredo, you know, because it ("Las Crecientes de Beulah") mentioned that it went through Laredo. It starts about the hurricane, you know, about where it came and then the route from Brownsville up to Alice and then

it turned to Laredo. By the time it got to Laredo it was weak, it was pretty weak with just a little rain. I mentioned that, but then it's where the corrido starts after Beulah, it's when for a lot of people it was worse ...

DNR: The aftermath.

GP: Yes, the aftermath.

DNR: Did you play for campesinos outside the state of Texas? Did they ask for Beulah in Arizona, California?

GP: Yeah, because we were touring, you know.

DNR: So, "Las Crecientes de Beulah" was kind of like the news it let them know what's happening down there.

GP: Right. I remember one thing. I'm not going to mention names, but I remember one thing that a few years later one DJ from a Mission station was going on a KRT ... he called me and say, "Hey, do you have the Beulah record?" I say, "Yeah, I think I have it. Well, go pick one, because of the date, September the 19th So, I gave him one and he played it. Then I went to a different station, and I told them ... a bigger station ... I told the DJ there, that Mission station was playing "Las Crecientes de Beulah." I said, "I got a record." And he said, "Nah, who wants to remember Beulah." And, I didn't like the way he said it. But, he said "Nah, Beulah's gone and forgotten." "Who wants to hear something sad that had happened?" Stuff like that, you know. And my answer was "Who wants to hear about Juan Charisquiao? Or Rosita Alvirez or (Ramirez)? They were killed many years ago and they still played those corridos. So didn't like what he said. But, you know, I was promoting my group at the time so I had to play along with the DJs. So, that's one thing I remember. And, like I said, I'm not going to mention names. Cause that man is already ... he passed away.

DNR: What are some positive things that people said about "Las Crecientes de Beulah"? Some appreciative comments?

GP: Well, like, like I said before, a lot of people a lot of our fans like our music because sad songs ... even Rudy Villarreal who recorded about the legends ... when he mentions my name he mentions a lot of groups, how when he mentions my name he starts he says, "In Mercedes, Texas was born Gilberto Perez, and he got famous for the sad songs he used to sing." He mentions that in ah ... (to his wife seated a the reclining chair in the room the interview was being conducted) Como se llama de el, el CD de Rudy Villarreal? "Las Leyendas"? Or, something like that. You haven't heard it?

DNR: No, I haven't.

GP: He plays a little of every conjunto. He played about two or three records of ours. He starts with Narciso Martinez and all the way up.

DNR: So, "Crecientes de Beulah" it captured the ... I guess the feeling of the people during the aftermath.

GP: Yes, right.

DNR: In Mercedes, in Harlingen, in Roma, and even in Camargo and Matamoros, too. Because in the lyrics ... and I'm going to ask some questions about the lyrics now ... you talk about how Mexicanos on both sides of the Rio Grande ...

GP: uh huh.

DNR: ... faced hardship

GP: Right.

DNR: And dealt with destruction. So, you write hear "Que sufrieron ambos lados"

GP: uh huh ... "ambos lados"

DNR: So, why do you feel, when you all were writing lyrics into two, three o'clock in the morning, why did you all feel like "you what, we need to talk about Camargo and how the people came over ...

GP: To seek refuge

DNR: To seek refuge in Roma and Rio Grande City ... why it is important to talk not only how things were on this side, but also on the other side?

GP: We had to include that in the lyrics because it was in the news all the time, and of course we knew what happened on the other side of the river. A lot of people there suffered a lot. That's how come a lot of people from across came to Rio Grande, in that little book I have it says in Roma and Rio Grande la gente se refugio. And, it was news and what heard and what came in the newspapers and also the main reason, the main point, it was because of people not living in the Valley ... say from San Antonio, Houston ... we wanted the people to know what happened over here. Of course, they knew by the news. But, we wanted ... and even the President visited us to call it a disaster area, and Kika de la Garza was there at the time. And a lot of things that happened, you know, we wanted the people up north to hear what had happened, about the crecientes ... they heard more about the Hurricane, and then the afterwards ...

DNR: Right. Okay, I bring that up to because on the local news it's seem like they covered what happened en este lado and en el otro lado, tambien, but on the

national news it didn't cover so much how Hurricane Beulah effected both sides. Like in Life Magazine, they say Hurricane Beulah hit Texas, but that's it.

GP: That's how come we did it, because we wanted to do it for Spanish-speaking people, you know. I'm going to say this. In God's eyes, we're all brothers. Regardless of the side of the River. That's how come we said "In Brownsville and Matamoros." We said "En Tejas and Tamaulipas siempre se recordará." It will always be remembered in Tamaulipas as in Texas, because the thing went through here, even though, it was at the very, very tip of Texas in the Matamoros area, they suffered. The same way we did here.

DNR: What's so interesting about your song "Las Crecientes de Beulah" is you talk about how the communities worked together from both sides, like Roma allowing the citizens of Camargo to come across. Right. So, would you say ... cause corridos they usually have a heroes right, many corridos do. Would you say the gente of the community be the hero of "Las Crecientes de Beulah"?

GP: Well, in that question, I'm going to say there were a lot of heroes, like the fire departments, the police force, the highway patrol, any kind of force, you know, that would help in different ways, Like when we came back from Arizona, they had, in the area of Rio Grande and Roma, it was pretty bad and flooded. So, they had the farmers furnish tractors to pull people that were coming back to the Valley. So, they were some of the heroes and some of the heroes also saved a lot of stuff from ... and people from being drowned. So, actually, I wouldn't know who to call a particular hero, but everybody joined in as an Army to help one another. And, most of the time when things like this happened that are pretty sad, people always get together in prayers and in helping one another. That's the way it mostly happens.

DNR: You also write in addition to the community you say the Governor of Texas, junto con el Presidente, came to witness the destruction. So, here you're referring to President Johnson and Texas Governor Connally when they came eight days after Beulah hit. What are your reflections on their quick visit?

GP: Well, for everybody here it was un consuelo, you know, to name it a disaster area for getting help from the State and from the President. It helped for them to see what had really happened, and there was a lot of damage. It was in the millions, you know.

DNR: Were you back in the Valley when President Johnson came?

GP: Yes. We were here just right after Beulah.

DNR: So, the last question on the lyrics. Toward the end of "Las Crecientes de Beulah" you tell the listener "perdoname" "forgive me" for not being able to mention many other cases that happened during the hurricane.

GP: Yes.

DNR: Can you explain why you ask for forgiveness?

GP: Well, at the time it was a 45rpm records that we used to cut. And they were limited, you could only get so much time. The jukeboxes wouldn't play longer than so much time, you know. And, so we had to work in a way that got as much information as we could in say, less than three minutes. So, that's how I ask. Like for example, we mention Harlingen, Rio Hondo, La Feria, Mercedes, Mission, McAllen, Reynosa and Matamoros. So, I say forgive me for not mentioning Rio Bravo or mentioning Weslaco, or Edinburg. They suffered the same way we did. But, we couldn't get it all. But, the reason is because ... que dice ... Dios es la que mande esto es... it'swhat would you call it?

DNR: God's will. Divine Providence.

GP: So, excuse me for singing this and missing the towns and the people. So, I mentioned whatever I could in this particular time that I have to record.

DNR: To fit the 45.

GP: You can make it longer now. In a CD you can play a song for five six minutes or whatever.

DNR: I guess the radio might not have liked an eight minute corrido on Beulah, too?

GP: Oh no.

DNR: It's more marketable to have the three minute corrido.

GP: Right. And, concerning jukeboxes, you know. There were a lot of jukeboxes at the time that would play only so much time, and it would stop playing even if the song wasn't through yet. It would quit because of time. Also, they were there to make money. (Laughs)

DNR: So it wasn't marketable or profitable to have the song run longer than four minutes.

GP: Yes. Because back in the 50s and 60s a lot of cars and trucks didn't have a radio, so more jukeboxes would play.

DNR: Hurricane Beulah was such an important historic event and as we've been talking about, it's also a really important topic for conjunto artists and producers. Like Falcon, and Ideal, and Chico. I looked up online and saw that "Las Crecientes de Beulah" has a copyright date of December 23rd 1968. So, when did it first come out? Did it come out first on the 45 and it went through the copyright later.

GP: Yes. And, one thing ... it's not funny, But, we wrote the lyrics and somebody else copyright it. We put it out and we didn't copyright it. So, somebody else did that part. It happens. Back in the 50s and 60s and lot of groups, conjuntos and a lot of types of music would write original material and wouldn't copyright because they didn't know where to go. And the companies itself, there were some companies that had a name that wasn't real. They'd put that name just to not pay royalties... an invented name. Like they do nowadays, they use IDs from people that have died, you know. It always happened in a lot of ways not only in the music business. But, a lot of ... like the song that was very popular, and it's still very popular that I recorded back in 1963, "Con Cartitas" it was also not copyright by the real composer. And a lot of songs that I have recorded that somebody else took over that got smart and quicker. Laughs.

DNR: So we mentioned Agapito Zuniga who as you said you listening to and said, "Hey, he has a tragedia, but we need a something about the aftermath of Beulah" I think with Zuniga, he wrote "Tragedia de Huracan Beulah" and that came out under Bego. And then Tony de la Rosa covered it under FAMA. The Tony de la Rosa cover I found that one on YouTube. And Tony de la Rosa went on to include the corrido in his exitos. And then there's also a corrido by José Morante called "Las Victimas de Beulah" which Flaco Jimenez performs. So, you talked about how you heard Zuniga and were like "Hey we need to talk about the aftermath of Beulah with "Las Crecientes." Did you ever listen to Jose Morantes "Las Victimas de Beulah"?

GP: No. The name sounds familiar, pero I can't remember his music.

DNR: We I first got here I was showing you these two albums that I have, this one here put out by Ideal that Gilbero Lopez y su Conjunto released that has "Las Crecientes" covered ... see right there (shows Gilberto Perez the 33rpm). Then, this one here "Beulah ... y las Crecientes"

GP: Like here it's got the names of the (composers)

DNR: Perez, Garza, Gonzalez

GP: I mentioned Medina but he wasn't there. It was my compadre Raul and my compadre Cruz, and then Perez is for me and Alejandro.

DNR: And then there is Morante's Victimas that Gilberto Lopez also covered. And then there's the credit given to Jose Morante and then there's Zuniga's, too. So, it's like a whole themed album about Beulah that got put out. And then, there's this one here by ORO that it looks like it got released later cause it's more colorful. So the question that I have is why do you think record producers like Ramirez from Falcon and Armando Marroquin from Ideal put out the Beulah concept albums? Were they selling? Basically, they would get other conjunto acts to perform your song.

GP: I heard the Agapito Zuniga version, but a lot of these other versions ... I ... there's one written by Enrique Maldonado, and I recorded a lot of songs for him, but I've never heard this particular version "Recuerdos de Beulah" and another one by Enrique Maldonado "Corrido de Beulah" ... Jose Morante, I knew him more as a composer than a musician. Because I used to see his name under a lot of songs.

DNR: It seems like maybe Ramirez and Marroquin ... they thought that these concept albums, right

GP: What happened was the record companies at the time ... somebody puts out something and it's competition, you know.

DNR: Okay.

GP: Actually it's what it turns out to be. Like my daddy used to say, competition is good because it makes you move it makes you keep going. But, only if it's clean ... if competition is dirty, it's not right. Laughs.

DNR: Is that a dicho?

GP: La competencia es Buena sea limpia. Porque te hace que te muevas. Pero sea la competencia es murgrosa, no sirve. So, it was telling us, teaching us to be competitive with somebody else ... but be clean.

DNR: Right.

GP: Don't cheat don't do something bad for competition because competition is going to keep you going.

DNR: And it kept Ideal, Falcon, Oro Bronco ... it was kind of like a snowball effect or domino effect, one did it and the other record companies in the Valley followed.

GP: It's like if something puts a filling station in one corner of the street and somebody else puts another one in front. There not going to a mile away, there going to put it right there because right there is the business. So, it's similar to what happened with competition. Fijate que, I didn't know that that many corridos were written for Beulah.

DNR: Yeah. Yours got covered a lot, and Morante's was covered a lot, and Agapito Zuniga's was covered a lot. Yours, Morante's and Zuniga's were the three main corridos that were put on all of these (Beulah) concept albums.

GP: I see.

DNR: Did you get any royalties?

GP: No. It wasn't ... like I said it wasn't copyright under our name.

DNR: So, Ramirez and Marroquin never asked you, "Hey, Gilberto can we use "Las Crecientes" for Gilberto Lopez?

GP: Well, actually you don't have to. The writer is supposed to copyright it. But, it happened so fast, you know, that by the time ... it had happened in other recordings we made. We record. And then, a lot of these companies they record a song, and then they wait until they get so many songs so they can send it to be published. During that time comes the sharks, you know. And, they find out it's not copyrighted, and so they copyright it.

DNR: What year do you think Gilberto Lopez (*26' Norte 97.3' Oeste Huracan Beulah*) came out? Do think this is '68 or '69?

GP: I wouldn't know cause I never heard it.

DNR: I was looking on the album for a year and I can't find a year. Obviously, the album came out after you wrote "Las Crecientes de Beulah" because your corrido is on here.

GP: Because in this area ... and we used to travel a lot ... all I heard was Agapito Zuniga's version, and then ours came. The pressers were pressing twenty-four hours to furnish the records. It was slow motion, you know, not quick like nowadays. But, they worked because everybody was asking for the records, not only in this particular area but all the way to California.

DNR: Wherever there were campesinos or pockets of Mexicanos in the urban cities.

GP: Uh huh. Andalé. Right.

DNR: Is there anything else you'd like to add about Hurricane Beulah that we didn't cover?

GP: No, not really. Like I said, whatever I remember, whatever I think about Beulah, it's in the tragedia, the corrido. And of course, like I say in the last verse ... "Perdoname" si no mencioné.

DNR: Before we end the interview Mr. Perez, I want ask you about what you remember about the Chicano Movement . El Movimiento Chicano. Do you recall anything about the Movement, student walkouts, Cesar Chavez, Corky Gonzalez. When you toured across the United States did you experience anything from the raza?

GP: We used to hear the news and everything that was going on. But, like I said for many years and concentrated on my group and my kind of business, you know, to

support my family. So, I never was, unless I had to, be political, you know. One time I was told, like when there was completion on the dances here. They said, Like it or not you have to go into politics to do this or that. But, I didn't believe in that because I was so busy touring and playing here and there. We kept pretty busy all the time.

DNR: Did you ever experience discrimination while touring ... on the road?

GP: Oh yes. Especially when we would travel going towards Florida. We used to go through Alabama and Louisiana. Those states. There were places we'd stop. We didn't have a Stripes and a Valero like we have now. There were just gas stations and they served you. You couldn't touch the gas pump. There was a lot of places that we knew there was discrimination there.

DNR: Where you'd get the full service, but it wasn't really full service. They'd give you a look or tell you something.

GP: But, we were satisfied because we went back. Like when Colored people had their portion, they couldn't go nowhere with White people ... restaurants, theaters ... the top was for Colored the bottom for White, restaurants, one side for Colored, one side for White Even the restrooms, and everything was divided because of discrimination. I want to mention one thing that ... I don't know if you want to put it ... but I mentioned earlier in 1957 when the football team, the Tigers of Mercedes, went to play at State against West Columbia ... and buses took people over there, you know, the fans. We were hungry and there was a store there. And, we went to buy bologna and bread, you know, something to munch on ... and sodas. And they had a sign in the front door that said "No Mexicans Allowed." That was in West Columbia. So, back in those days ... and in certain places there was discrimination, not only for Mexicans, but for several races.

DNR: And that's what the Chicano Movement worked to correct. It fought for social equality and equality for education.

GP: Yes, Cesear Chavez ... and Tony ... Tony ... como se llama ... I'm kind of hard of ... it not Alztimer's it's Old Timer's (laughs) I forget names. But, people they used to walk and protest.

DNR: Right. There was the Farm Workers Movement.

GP: Right all those Movements ... I was for it because I worked in the fields very hard, and so people getting benefits for the migrations ... when they get back home the State of the Government furnished help. When we worked in the fields we didn't have restrooms in the fields. You had to go into the woods. So, that was good for these guys that were doing this. They are people working there building up this country ... helping. And, they got paid but I knew for a fact that most migrants were underpaid.

DNR: You saw that firsthand when you were picking and also again when you were performing for the campesinos.

GP: Right.

DNR: Before we go here, could you talk about your song "Chicano From Mercedes." Is that a play on Merle Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee?"

GP: Right.

DNR: What inspired you to write it?

GP: Instead of translating it, which that second version I did because a distributor from San Antonio ... one of the biggest distributors that was around at the time ... asked, "Why didn't you do it bilingual?" I said "No." I just ... actually, my purpose was to do it for the kids at school. When the song says, "they get their kicks down at the ballgame." "You can hear them hollering let's go Tigers" You know and stuff like that, so it's more concentrated for the Mercedes young people. So, I decided to do it all in English. But, later on I got pushed. So I did a couple of versions in Spanish. But, it was from the version of "Okie From Muskogee." And, in a different way because "Okie From Muskogee" (laughs) says "they don't smoke" and "they still wave Old Glory down by the court house" ... and stuff like that ... different lyrics. But using the tune, it was similar ... actually it's not the same, it's similar.

DNR: Right, right. Because Merle Haggard he was writing about the Conservative values of being an Okie From Muskogee, basically saying we're not like those long-haired hippies, and we don't smoke your Marijuana and all that. Then you come in a say, ok, well, here's how it is to be a Chicano from Mercedes.

GP: Yeah. Because the simple things like the pool hall from Mr. Perez and the Rio Theater from Arteaga, and Sergio Gonzalez's chicken place over there on hwy 83, and the Mer-Tex ... simple things.

DNR: When did you write "Chicano From Mercedes"? 1970? 1971?

GP: It was in the 70s already. Because all the kids we had, the three kids we had at the time were in school and band.

DNR: So was the song meant to make them feel proud about being from here?

GP: In a way yes, because when they built this new football stadium here in Mercedes, when they inaugurated it, they played "Chicano From Mercedes" over the sound system. I didn't hear it, but one of my grandsons came and told me "Hey, you know what? They played a record over there "Chicano From Mercedes." I said "good."

DNR: Do you think it makes people proud to be Mexican-American, to be from Mercedes, from the Valley?

GP: Yes.

DNR: Ok. To conclude is there anything you want to say about the survival of conjunto into the twenty-first century?

GP: The survival?

DNR: Yeah.

GP: Well, the main reason I think the survival of the conjunto is on the accordion itself. The accordion's got a sound. And, it's got the keys that I would comment it's got a lot of happiness. It makes people holler it makes people want to dance. And the new kids, you know, they hear it and it's in their blood. I think what inclining I had for the conjunto because of my brothers and because of Narciso Martinez, and Pedro Ayala and all those guys, Valerio Longoria, and then came Ruben Vela and on and on, and it kept going. And, it's still going on a contemporary system. The new groups that are contemporary, their music ... they've changed a lot. But, still the accordion has taken the lead in the conjunto. So, I hope, in fact, I know that this music of the conjunto, or music related to the conjunto with the accordion will never die, just like mariachi music or country western. They might fade away for a while concerning the younger generations that are coming. They go into different styles, you know, different cultures. It changes, but the conjunto or the accordion and bajo sexto, conjunto plus the norteño music that uses the same instruments, it's pretty well known and concentered or grandfathered – I would call it grandfathered – I think that's a better word for it. And, I think it will go on from now on, hopefully for the sake of the newcomers that are going to follow our steps. The new kids ... I always ... yo les ... that's what I say, "yo lo que les dió "keep it going, keep it going, keep it going." Some people say, "No, conjunto's dying." "Nah."

DNR: It finds a way to resurface.

GP: The ones that are dying are the legends and the old conjuntos, but the music is going to still play because the music has been recorded. And, you hear a new conjunto, contemporary music, and they play the same music and mostly the same songs we used to play forty, fifty, sixty years ago. Same songs. So, the reason when I recorded with Little Joe, and Lupe Saenz was there, he's the President of the Conjunto Association, and he was asked how come the conjunto was fading away. And Lupe Saenz answered, "That's how come we made the Conjunto Association ... the South Texas Conjunto Association to keep it going." And Little Joe answered, "The reason is because we are lacking composers to write songs, and the reason is because us ... what they call in California and Arizona ... "pochos" ... the Texans

DNR: Tex-Mex, Tejanos ...

GP: The Texans, or Californians that are grown and raised here in the United States; he says, "We don't know the language." And then, when they asked me I told them, "I'm not going to contradict Little Joe, but we have the composers, and I'm not going to put down anybody. But, the radio, nowadays the radio has got a lot of power. And what you hear on the radio is what people like. They hear it so much that they like it, even if they didn't like it before. But, you hear it so much. I say, like an old song ... they play it in their style, and that's what they hear. So, and not a conjunto ... a different style, so they (the radio) created them. But still, the song or whatever it is, it's still a conjunto una obra de conjunto ... what conjunto created ... so it'll be there. But, I have composers here that are writing songs for me, but it never gets airplay. Just for a few fans I have that buy the records. But, it's not dying; it's fading away because of the publicity. And, we have to face this – Money. Dinero manda. The more promotion you get, they more famous you become. Like the cars nowadays, the more promotion they have more cars they sell ... or whatever ... the more hamburgers they promote (laughs) they're going to sell, even if you have burgers that are better than the ones they are selling. But, we have the composers, and good composers here. But, there's no justice. One DJ from the other side (Mexico) told me one time, "La musica no tiene banderas" Music doesn't have flags. And, I told him, "You're right, music doesn't have flags. The ones that have the flags are the Disc Jockeys that promote the music. (laughs) And he said, "Nah, come on, you're putting me down." And I said, "No, I'm talking right, I'm talking the truth." That's how come music from you don't know where becomes famous here ... because they promote it, and they promote it in a very expensive way. And, then the recording system makes it easier to record now. I would say that a person who's got a good voice, a good commercial voice, but he's out of tone ... he sings probably through a computer and they fix it, you know. And when he makes personal appearances, they use the computer system, and it sounds like he's in tune all the time. It's one way of doing it. And, they fit a lot into, and they'll make him famous, even if he's only got charisma ... it counts a lot. Or if he's good looking or the girl is good looking; then there's a lot of things they can do to promote somebody. It's a difference from the old days than now.

DNR: You had to have more of that natural talent in the old days, whereas now you can photo-shop or auto-tune.

GP: Right.

DNR: ... and you can package the product, the person, and then you can have your "in" with the multi-million or billion dollar record industry, and they'll pay the DJs to play the songs every hour on the hour, and condition the people to like it. And, if you don't have that "in" then you're not in.

GP: Right.

DNR: But, like you were saying, nowadays with YouTube that's how the music can survive, which is how actually I came across some of these corridos here, on YouTube. I typed in "corridos Hurricane Beulah" put that on my search and bom bom bom ... hits.

GP: Yeah, and even on YouTube, as you mention, the new groups, the new singers of any kind of music, they promote it (music and video) with lots of lights, lots of dancing, and ...

DNR: Well, yes, but YouTube is a way that conjunto and the small acts can survive.

GP: Yes, it's the area like I said, La Onda. La Onda, you know.

DNR: La Onda and YouTube

GP: Some conjuntos say ... even conjuntos, young conjuntos say, "You have to jump up and down, and do like Jaime Mellande in order to please people. Because mostly, a higher percentage than the old people, the people that watch concerts and dances, they're more likely to see a show band, they play good music also, but they want to see shows doing something, dancing or whatever. And, it goes back, it started with Chuck Berry when he used to do the Cruise Walk and stuff like that ... Elvis Presley shake all of his body. It was something different, that's how come he got so famous. So, these new groups are trying to the same in a different way. Like, in my old days, we didn't have lights or flashers or stuff like that, we just played there and that was it, the people would dance.

DNR: You had amplifiers, your bajo sexto, your accordion, your microphone or two, and percussion.

GP: And even when you go back to Narciso Martinez, when I heard Narciso Martinez with Valerio Longoria and Raul Martinez "El Ruco," those old guys they didn't even have sound systems. They got in the middle of the patios, you know they'd play in the patios, and play accordion and the guitar or whatever it was with no microphone no nada.

DNR: The music survives. Second to last question, why do you think the corrido ... like those on Beulah, I mean, this is the fifty anniversary in 2017, fifty years since Beulah hit back on September 19th -September 20th 1967, it's going to be the fiftieth anniversary, and we're doing some stuff at the University ... Dios quiere if you're in good health maybe I can invite you to come to the University to talk about Beulah, a lot of people don't know that corridos on Beulah exist. And, I've told some of my colleagues, "You know there's corridos on Hurricane Beulah" and they say "Really!"

GP: Well, the new generations, yeah.

DNR: And then when I play it for people they're blown away. So, what makes corridos like "Las Crecientes de Beulah" and your other songs so important to Mexican-American culture? To Tejanos?

GP: Fijate que, that's a question that I even ask myself. Like it's something that I haven't been able to analyze or figure out. When you hear a corrido like say just the day before yesterday Viente-cuatro de Junio, you start singing, (sings) "Vienti-Cuatro de Junio de San Juan" and people talk hollering ... and they're going to kill somebody in the corrido. Why do we holler? Is it the Indian blood? Or, what is it that Mexican people that come from the resendencia Mexicano, verda, why do we holler? I ask myself, and I can't answer myself. (Laughs)

DNR: Why do you feel compelled to teach conjunto to the students in Monte Alto. Remember we started speaking, you said you went to Monte Alto to show the students conjunto. What's the purpose?

GP: Well, the purpose of letting the kids know about our backyard music, you know. To know their culture. From the school, Mr. Benny Leyton, I credit him for that because he was one of the conjunto teachers in the Edcouch-Elsa area that taught accordion and bajo sexto. And, it was his idea, we saw his promotion deal to let the kids ... and before that, before me and Wally Gonzalez went, I had seen that the Delta area, which is Edcouch, La Villa, and Elsa, Monte Alto, and that particular area, a lot of good musicians came out from there because of Leyton's teaching. So, I say, pues, he's doing something right, you know. He's keeping the culture and letting the kids know what our local music has been ... it's been a tradition here for years and years, and he wanted the kids to keep it going. And, still, I say that in the Valley area, the Delta-area has got darn good musicians. They probably, some of them are not big names, because they went into different kind of work, you know, but they know their music, they can play music better than we can. And then, from these students from Benny Leyton, their sons and daughters, their kiddos come in. Like Benny's sister Orphelia, her son plays the accordion, and he plays it very good, and he's a boy ... entenderá ir como unos twelve years old horita, no? Ten, twelve years old, and he's playing the accordion for the Layton brothers.

DNR: Each generation keeps conjunto and the significance of the accordion alive.

GP: Yes.

DNR: It's like the way you were the Red Rockers ... the Valley is Rock and Roll and Conjunto Soul, right. It's part of our history, our music history, and our heritage. Okay, so the last question that I have, Mr. Perez, is what do you want to be remembered for, in terms of being a conjunto artist? When it's time for you to ascend into those pearly gates of heaven, for us folks still down here in El Valle, Texas, across the Untied States ... what do you want to be remembered for?

GP: Well, I think that I have recorded so many recordings, I think that's how I'm going to be remembered among fans and friends. Not only here in the Valley. Like I said, I knew people in many places. And, that's how come me and one friend of mine, his name is Horacio Chapa, we wrote a song that's called "Mi Ultimo Deseo" "My Last Wish" ... and it says there what I want. Especially concerning my family and what I want my family to do when the Big Man up there calls me. I ask ... well, it's in the song "My Last Wish" and at the very last version is where I say "come to my house" in la carosa, to the cemetery. And I even have a video. I videotaped that song. It starts to where I'm sick and God's calling me, and I ask my family to come and embrace me before I mi paye esperdón ... before I ask for pardon. And then I start from there, you know. From the funeral home to the church, and que me resen la misa, to pray the mass for me. And, then from the church to pass by my house, and I have all that written down. Also, I have to have my rosary done in the funeral home. I mention all that from actually dying and saying that ... in a verse I say, "esta vida ... we're not forever, we're just passing through" Individually, it shows that a bunch of money and new cars and stuff, nada te más a llevar. Todo lo que nació muere. Even the video, it shows a flower, you know. It grows and then it dies. So, we're just like a plant that grows and dies. So, I better ask what I want be done before I go away in that particular song. And, I think that my family and one of my good friends ... a lot of people say, "Hey, I'm your number one fan, I'm your number one fan." I here that all over where I go. Well, good for me and good for them cause maybe they're going to remember me as the song says. And, I hope that I will be remembered (laughs) for give me ... that I was a good man. (Laughs)

DNR: And for being a darn good accordion player and conjunto artist.

GP: I know, I know they're going to say that because I've already heard from my sons and daughters from my family and from my wife ... I heard them say like "You're the best father." ... I recorded a song that was written by un cousin of my wife. I helped him a little bit, but he did the main part. He's starting to get old, you know. And, he prays to his father. And then another friend wrote ... wrote a song about his mom, and I changed it to "A Mama a Papa." And there was one guy that he was mostly raised in California and he moved to Texas. And him and his wife asked before something happened to them, he was going to ask ... he wanted to come and meet me in person, because I was, you know, her and his idol, or whatever you want to call it. So, they came over. And, I said, "Hey, I recorded a new song." And I played it. I don't have it now ... the CD player. And, I played it. It starts, "homenaje a papa, saying how good he was, what he learned from him, and he wanted to be like him, and he was a good man. And, the man was sitting here listening. And, when the song was over he said, "That's a good song ... that's a good song. But, I want to tell you one thing. If I would have know my father I would have killed him!" (Laughs) "What happened?" I said. He said, "He left us when we were kids." (Laughs). I said, "But he's still your father." He said, "I don't care I would have killed him. I never liked him." "But, it's a good song," dice. I would say percentage-wise, statistic-wise, most of us love our father regardless, and forgiveness... forgiveness is one of the most important things in life. If you don't forgive, you're not going to be forgiven. So I told

him, "Why don't you forgive him?" He said, "Well, I might think it over." It's kind of funny, but things happen, you know. But, like I said at the beginning I hope I'll be remembered for what I have done, and even for what I have failed to do. I don't blame people for disliking me, or not liking my productions that I made along the years. I don't blame them. There's a lot of talent. There's a lot of ... like in my field, there's a lot of types of music and musicians, and I hope the best for them. Even I pray for every fellow musician that's going around. Because it's work, and sometimes it gets to be kinda hard work, and to be away from the family, and to have problems with the family or have problems with the compañeros, you know the group. Because we are all God's creation, but we're not all alike. When I was traveling, I had a lot of hard times to keep the group together. That's why I pray for my fellow musicians, and pray that they do well, because como decía a mi papa, "Pa todos hay" What you have sold that's what you are going to get. Ese que sesienta a dormir, no vas el nada. So, I pray for them to get up and do something that's worth something, so they can make a better living for their family because they are working for that. Even the families from my fellow musicians that have a good job, but still do their music, I ask God to help them because they travel and they might have an accident or something, which we didn't have nothing like that, so praise the Lord for that. So, I pray for all the musicians every day.

DNR: Alright. Thank you, Mr. Perez so much.

GP: You're very welcome.

Interview with Gilberto Perez: Follow-up

July 24, 2017

Diana Noreen Rivera: Alright, it's rolling. What were the news stations that you were listening to when you were in Phoenix?

Gilberto Perez: While in Phoenix, for the radio stations, it was a couple of Spanish radio stations, at the time. I remember KFIN in Phoenix, and the other one I can't recall it because it was newer.

DNR: Okay.

GP: But, it was Spanish, and then through television in English, you know, the news.

DNR: The national news channels?

GP: Right. The national news. Well, you know, sometimes they exaggerate or you can't understand, or they make it more exaggerated than it actually is. So, that's one of the reasons why we turned back to find out what really had happened because our families were back here in the Valley.

DNR: Yeah, yeah. Okay. And then, who were your band-mates at the time. Because when you say "we turned back" I know you turned back, but who were the other guys in the band?

GP: It was the original Gilberto Perez y Su Compadres group. It was made by myself and Ramon Medina, and Cruz Gonzalez Jr. and Alejandro Perez, my brother. It was just four pieces at the time.

DNR: Four piece, okay, Alright. And then, over here (Rivera shows Gilberto Perez the typed transcription from the first interview), you say that, or I mention, "at that point when Beulah hit you were a family man," and you said "yes," at that point you and Mrs. Perez had a one-year-old baby boy, your youngest son. And so, and then you say, you told the man in Phoenix, "call the guy in California I'm going to turn back."

GP: Right.

DNR: Do you remember name of the guy in Phoenix and the promoter in California?

GP: Yes. Our promoter in Phoenix, Arizona ... Calderón was his last name. And, we were going to move from there to California with Arnulfo Delgado.

DNR: Okay.

GP: They called him "El Gordo Delgado." (laughs)

DNR: (Laughs)

GP: His name was Delgado, but he was kind of fat. (laughs) And Mr. Calderón's name was Leonardo Calderón. Calderón's ballroom in Phoenix, at the time, was the most famous and the biggest place in town.

DNR: And, was Mr. Calderón upset? Or, did he understand?

GP: Well, he understood, you know. He also heard the news and knew what was happening. We used to, like I said, just make it on another date, just move it (the tour) up.

DNR: Yeah,

GP: And, they had so many groups, it didn't hurt them because they could have any group at anytime.

DNR: Okay. Alright. Then we talked about how I asked you, "how did you make it back to the Valley?" And you said that you took Hwy 83 from Del Rio to Eagle Pass, Laredo, all the way down. And then you mentioned that when you got to Rio Grande City that it was really bad.

GP: Yes, that's when it was worse.

DNR: Right the worst of it.

DNR: And you said that some people there in Rio Grande City, they were using tractors to help pull or push cars ...

GP: Over the flood areas.

DNR: Yeah. So, did they have to push your car?

GP: No.

DNR: Okay. You just got across. Do you remember what kind of car you and the conjunto were driving?

GP: We were driving a station wagon with a trailer pulling the instruments.

DNR: And it had enough power to make it through the floodwaters?

GP: It was in '67 ... we had a new one that year. And, the reason that a lot of people got stuck, they didn't slow down enough. The water was too high. And we even hear the fan hitting the water, but we went so slow through the water that we made it across a few places that were flooded. Thank God we made it. We didn't have to get pulled or nothing.

DNR: That's good.

GP: We had a smart driver. (chuckles)

DNR: Did you guys take turns, like driving in shifts to just drive straight down from Phoenix?

GP: Straight. Oh yes. Straight.

DNR: So, you would drive say eight hours, and then Medina drive, and then Alejandro.

GP: Yes, we all used to drive. We used to compromise, you know. We'd say "I'll take it here to El Paso." Or, something like that. Or, "you take it there to another town," you know.

DNR: Yeah. There you go. Okay.

GP: We drove. We even made tours that we started here and went to Burley, Idaho. The first stop. That's over 2,000 miles straight down. (laughs)

DNR: Non-stop.

GP: Non-stop. We just, you know, to gas up.

DNR: Well, yeah, gas up, bite to eat, right?

GP: Yes, and munchies! Laughs. Balony. That was the fast-food at the time.

DNR: That's right. Sandwiches. Okay. How high did the water come up to the car?

GP: Well, we even got it inside the station wagon.

DNR: But it was still able to power through the floodwaters in Roma and Rio Grande City?

GP: Yes. I remember one time there was a telephone pole coming through. We were driving like that through the water, you know, as we saw a telephone post coming, and I told Medina, he was driving. I said, "Stop here." He said, "Why?" "Stop. Look at that telephone post coming toward us! We're going to make it there at the same time." So, we stopped. And, sure enough the telephone post went by. And then he started again, and I said, "Stop again." "Why?" I was looking, and there was a butane tank floating, floating, floating. A big one! About a two-pound butane tank floating in the water. It must have been empty, I don't know. But, it passed right in front of us, sure enough.

DNR: In Starr County?

GP: Yes, in Starr County. It was between Rio Grande and Mission, in that area.

DNR: Penitas? Or La Joya?

GP: Maybe through there in that area. I just can't recall the exact place, it's been so long ago.

DNR: But, the telephone pole and the butane tank (laughs) you remember that.

GP: (Laughs) I can't forget that because it would have hit us if we hadn't have stopped.

DNR: Well, yeah. Oh my gosh. Okay. Alright. So the other thing I wanted to ask you, because we went right into the corrido, and we talked about the corrido and how it was created. But, I wanted to ask you, before we went on and talked about "Crecientes" more, could you reminisce about how it was like to come into Mercedes? You went through Starr County and you saw the butane tank, and you were like "Medina, stop!" We're going to get hit by the butane tank and the telephone pole. And then you continued your journey through McAllen and Pharr, San Juan, Alamo, Donna, Weslaco.

GP: Right. Through Laredo first, and then all the way down.

DNR: Yeah. Then you finally get to Mercedes, and you see the water tower and the floodway. Can you talk more about what it was like to see Mercedes when you got in?

GP: It was kind of sad, you know, when we got to Mercedes, there was only one bridge at the time coming across the flood levees. And, when we finally got there we had a hard time because there was water outside the floodways, and the Llano Grande.

DNR: When you crossed the bridge was the water right up to the highway?

GP: Yes, it was almost hitting the top of the bridge. And the railroad track that went across there was almost, you couldn't hardly see it anymore. It was lower than the bridge itself. But, by that time we had contacted our families, and they were safe. Thank God. My wife and the kids went with one of my brothers. He used to live in the city apartments, big brick houses, you know. They were safe.

DNR: Off of Texas Blvd. Or, Vermont?

GP: Vermont. The Las Palmas Apartments. He was living there, one of my brothers. So, they stayed there during the chubasco. Then when Beulah left and I got back, we moved back to the house. And, thank God, it didn't tear up our house. Of course, the roof was tore up some, but not too bad, you know. Because, you know, in the towns there's a lot of houses, and a lot of wind breakers, which we don't have out here. But, a little before the levee broke, or the gates towards the Arroyo Colorado, we were checking the floodways. And, it kept building up, building up, building up. Me and

my brother used to come around and went to Mile 12 and hit the levees on the other side. And, we marked how much it was going up. And, it was going up and that's when I really got scared, you know. But then when the news hit the radio that the levees had broken and the water went towards La Feria.

DNR: and Harlingen

GP: Harlingen and all the way down. So, it was a relief for us, but it was bad for those poor people who got hurt, you know, that's how come we added that in the corrido, that Harlingen and Rio Hondo and La Feria got hit the worst from the crecientes. Because Mercedes, thank God ... we had water, but not enough to you know, to actually ..

DNR: Put the houses under water

GP: Right. No houses under water.

DNR: Did you see the boys putting sandbags on the levees in Mercedes?

GP: Yes, yes. It mentions in the corrido, too, that a lot of people worked on the levees trying to save Mercedes, but the levees broke. It's all told in the corrido.

DNR: Yeah, okay. And you house wasn't flooded in Mercedes. No flood damage, but wind damage to the roof.

GP: A little wind damage, yes.

DNR: And at the time you were living in town?

GP: Yes, on Heidrick Street next to Vermont.

DNR: Heidrick Street. Okay. Alright. We're going to keep going on ... Let's see here. Ah, okay. This other part here is when we start to talk about "Las Crecientes de Beulah," and you were telling me that that day you were in the studio with Johnny Phillips, and you and the band, the conjunto, you started playing what was going to "Las Crecientes de Beulah." And, you said that Johnny Phillips was like "Hey, what are you playing that sounds pretty good?" And you told him, "We're writing a tragedia, a corrido, about Beulah." And then you said that Johnny Phillips said, "You know what, you work on that?" So, what were you going to originally work on and record that day in the studio?

GP: Huh.

DNR: Do you remember?

GP: I remember the way that we were there. And Medina was missing, I don't know why, he was sick or something, and we didn't get to record, we just practicing and were actually working on that particular song. And we went ahead and finished that same day. It was one or two o'clock in the morning when we got through.

DNR: Right, right.

GP: So, I left him a note, saying we'll be back tomorrow to record it. But, Medina didn't make it, so, the actual group was not there. Medina was the bajo player plus the second voice. So, my brother played the bajo, and Pedro

DNR: Benavides.

GP: Pete Benavides played the bass. Cruz Gonzalez, he was the actual drummer, the original drummer. But, somehow ... they were pushing us to make it quick, so Chuy Villegas played the accordion. So at the time it was all recorded on just one mic. So we had to go over again anytime one made a mistake, and being that it was not the actual group there was going to be little mistakes here and there. So, he played the accordion for me while I was just singing, you know. And, the second voice was Raul Garza. But, he also was a member, and he also – I'm sorry I forgot to mention Raul Garza – he was in the band while coming back from Phoenix.

DNR: Oh okay. He was there, too. So, there was five.

GP: There was five actually.

DNR: Oh okay. I'll put that in there. Yeah, cause I have here from what you said: There was Chuy Villegas on accordion, you as lead vocal, singing, and then it was Alejandro, your brother, who was on the bajo, and then Compadre Cruz was on drums, and Pedro (Pete) Benavides was on the bass. But, not the bajo bass, right?

GP: Bass.

DNR: Just bass, like contrabass?

GP: Electric bass.

DNR: Electric bass. Okay. Got it. That was going to be my other question. Cause when you said two ...

GP: ... And Raul Garza was the second voice.

DNR: Yeah, and Raul Garza was the second voice. Okay. Let's see here. So these are just follow-up that I'm asking to help clarify, or make more clear, what was talked about ... I asked you a question here (shows the transcript from the first interview to

Mr. Perez) "Did you perform "Las Crecientes de Beulah" when you went back out on the road after Beulah?" And you said, "Yes."

GP: Yes.

DNR: And, I asked if you played it for any of the campesinos? And you said, "Yes, at the beginning, for maybe like six months or so they asked for it." And so, when you say, "They asked for it," is "they" the campesinos and the other Mexicanos up north when you would go on tour?

GP: Yes.

DNR: Okay. There you go. Let's see here. How was that like, Mr. Perez, when you go play for the campesinos, was there a stage or a dance hall close to the fields where they picked the fruits and vegetables, or how was that set up?

GP: Actually, the people that migrate in the Arizona, Phoenix area, you know, on the farms, but the dances were in town, in the big, big, big dance halls. We played a lot of big, big halls, and some small halls also in little towns.

DNR: How would the campesinos get to the dance halls? They had there own cars?

GP: Oh yes.

DNR: Do you remember how much money they had to pay to go to the dances in those days?

GP: It's kinda hard. Because we went through a lot of states that it varied. Variabola variabla. Like New Mexico had there prices. Arizona had there prices. The fancier the dance hall, or whatever it was called, you know, or the most popular, the higher the cover charge was you know. Or, the hours. Like the Calderón Ballroom. The dances last from eight o'clock at night until four o'clock in the morning. That was eight hours. And, there was a lot of places that played live music until four o'clock in the morning.

DNR: The Calderón Ballroom, where was that at, again?

GP: In Phoenix.

DNR: In Phoenix. And the campesions working in the Phoenix area would go to the Calderón.

GP: Yes, little ranches, you know, working in the fields, and then on the weekends they would come to the dances. And, of course, all those Western states always had a lot of Mexican-Americans that would follow us also that lived there that were born and raised there in Arizona, New Mexico, California.

DNR: Up in Washington, too, right?

GP: Yes, but when you move further down in those years, 60s and even the 70s, when you get to, like Colorado, Oregon, Utah, Washington state, Idaho, there weren't many Mexican people living at the time, but there was more people migrating to those particular states because there was a lot of work in the farms, in the fields. So, we had pretty good crowds.

DNR: So, like in the Seattle area, there were Mexicano ballrooms, too.

GP: It was Filipinos. It was called the Filipino dances. Some ... actually, when we went to Seattle, it was because one of my compadres, he was originally from Brownsville and working for the Boeing company here in Brownsville, and they moved him to Seattle, Washington and he moved all his family over there. And, he was the one who started taking Tejano music to that area. So, there was no Spanish, or Mexican dance halls or whatever you want to call it.

DNR: Until your compadre who was with Boeing in Brownsville got relocated up to the Seattle area?

GP: And he even passed away over there, him and my comadre also. They promoted dances during the 70s and 80s. I was the first group that went to Seattle, Washington.

DNR: And what was your compadre's name?

GP: Elizardo Rodriguez. We used to call him "El Chaparro" Rodriguez. He was kind of short. (Elizardo Rodriguez, Sr. 1932-2016)

DNR: (Laughs) He didn't have one of those name like Delgado, though.

GP: (Laughs)

DNR: Okay. Wow. Okay. Let's see. And then, in the Valley we talked about the news stations that you listened to when you were in Phoenix, Arizona. But, when you got back to the Valley and Mercedes, what news stations or radio station were you listening to about Beulah at the time? KGBT?

GP: Coming back all the way from Phoenix, Arizona we would catch, along our route, a lot of Spanish radio stations, which actually we didn't even know.

DNR: Like on the AM?

GP: But, everybody was talking about Beulah at the time. It was the biggest thing that happened in this area. Like they do anytime we have disasters, or something

like that, it goes all over the world. So, we listened even in English and Spanish. But, actually, we just turned the radio over and flipped stations, you know, and here it came, you know. On the news. So, because KGBT, you couldn't get it in Laredo. You could get it way down in Mexico, all the way to South America. But, not this way ...

DNR: Not north?

GP: Not ... north yes, you could even hear it in Houston. But, west or east, it was directional.

DNR: Like along the river (passed Laredo) you couldn't hear it.

GP: By the time you get to Laredo, it started fading away. But, there was a bunch of radio stations. They had one in Eagle Pass, they had one in Carrizo Springs, Laredo. And, all those little towns a lot of them had Spanish programs that were English stations, but had so many hours of Spanish programs.

DNR: Of Spanish radio programs. So, when you listened to the weather newscasts in the Valley, do you remember the radio stations you were listening to when Beulah hit?

GP: We actually listened more to KGBT.

DNR: KGBT. Do you remember the weather person at the time? Who would give the weather?

GP: You're talking about the radio station, right?

DNR: Yes, the radio station.

GP: Well, actually, they didn't have a ... The DJ there, they had block programs, you know, like Martin Gonzalez had a program, and Chuy de Leon, had another program also. Those old guys, you know. Francisco Gonzalez y Peña. The DJ that was there would do everything, would do the news, would program the music (laughs)

DNR: And the weather

GP: It was not like today, you know, where you have the weather man, the news man, the ...

DNR: The sportscaster.

GP: Yes. Everybody's got his own ... it's like the mechanics, you have one for transmission, one for the (unclear), one for the, for everything. And back in those days one man had to ... even like Martin Gonzalez and Manny Lopez and those guys, they'd say the news in Spanish, and they would translate it into English. Or, they

would get the newspaper, and it was written in English, but they were saying it in Spanish. They were translating it as they were reading. So guys like Martin Gonzalez and Chuy de Leon, and Manny Lopez, he's still living.

DNR: So, those were the men, the DJs who were the program hosts, giving the news about Beulah, or whatever weather event at the time, who won Mercedes or La Maquina Amarilla ...

GP: Right.

DNR: They did everything.

GP: Every radio host had his program and his own hours. So many hours, but they did the news.

DNR: And they did everything. Did you read any newspapers at the time during Hurricane Beulah, like the Valley Morning Star or the Brownsville Herald, did you follow the news with the newspapers, too? Or was it mostly the radio DJs?

GP: Actually, what we did there (Perez is referring to "Las Crecientes de Beulah") is actually what we saw. What we saw. Like, I mentioned, me and my brother, even when we had a lot of water in this area, we used to drive checking the levees and all that. And we drove through La Feria and Harlingen to see what was happening, you know.

DNR: You were measuring the water.

GP: But, also we would listen to the news. Because like I mentioned a while ago, sometimes the news missed something, or exaggerated something. So, come dice Mexicanos, "ver 'pa creer".

DNR: You got to see it to know it.

GP: You got to see it to believe it. Like St. Thomas. (laughs)

DNR: Yeah, Thomas Aquinas. Okay. Alright, that's good. Let me see, so this is the other question, Mr. Perez. When we were talking about when you wrote "Beulah" and I had asked you ... remember how I showed you all of those other corridos about Hurricane Beulah. Like when you wrote "Las Crecientes" you recalled that Agapito Zuniga had ...

GP: the corrido.

DNR: The corrido.

GP: His was the first corrido I heard. But actually, what we did, even from the beginning, we always tried to be original, or even in the style, we tried not to imitate any other conjunto or do what other conjuntos were doing. At the time, well, most of the conjuntos were the same. Like Ruben Vela had his own ways, his own songs, his own Polkas, and everything. And Tony de la Rosa, the same ... Valerio Longoria. All those guys that were going around strong at the time. We played different from one to another, different styles. And like, when we sat down to write something together, or even me, I tried not to even listen to other groups to try to do something on my own in my own way. That's why for over fifty years I still remember the first song I memorized. I memorized most of ... what people consider the hit songs like "Con Cartitas," "Por Que Dios Mio" a lot of songs that were hits at the time. Any some of them still are. They were songs that I still memorized, a lot of them.

DNR: And your song was different from Agapito Zuniga's because you talked about the Valley, the aftermath, the flooding. He starts his with the wind sound, and you started yours with the water sound.

GP: Right.

DNR: You said that you mic'd the washbowl, to get the water sound.

GP: Right. (laughs)

DNR: It's a very unique song, like the other corridos. It's about Beulah, but the aftermath and what happened particularly to the Valley cities a week later with the flooding.

GP: That's how come, you know, we used to write different songs. Compadre Medina was a good writer; my brother Alejandro was a good writer. My Compadre Medina even wrote a song that could be in the corrido ... or I don't know, about some couple who promised to get married, but the girl passed away and he even got married, she was in the funeral home, and he went and took the preacher and got married there. That's a song, you know. It's invented, you know. It's not real. But, Medina always tried to be different.

DNR: But, you'd mentioned this time that Compadre Medina, he was not in the studio the day that you stay till late, two or three o'clock in the morning, because he was sick.

GP: I'll be honest ... I don't ...

DNR: Or, was he there that day but not the next day because you couldn't reach him?

GP: He wasn't even there the day we wrote it. He didn't have a part in that particular song. He wrote a lot of songs and a lot of groups recorded his songs. Pero, he wasn't there ... actually, it's not Alzheimer's ... laughs.

DNR: I know. (laughs)

GP: There's a lot of ...

DNR: You would have liked him to be there, but wasn't there when the group was inventing...

GP: Something happened, and he was not here, or something like that.

DNR: But, ideally Johnny Phillips would have said, "Hey, give Compadre Medina a day or two. Let him get better" That way he can at least play on the record.

GP: Oh, he wanted, he did, Johnny Phillips wanted it NOW. And they had their own record present. They had everything there. Phillips, que some ... they took it where they press it, and the next day they had it on the market. And, he was right because, you know, things like that pass away, and then its' just a few day, or months and forget it. Some other things happen, or there are some good new songs that hit the radio and they play them more. The new stuff pushes the old stuff away.

DNR: Because you said that "Las Crecientes de Beulah," you played that pretty consistently for about maybe six months after Beulah hit.

GP: Yes.

DNR: People in Laredo, they liked it there because you mentioned that Beulah went through "los dos Laredos," and ...

GP: And Alice.

DNR: Alice, right. How far north did you play "Las Crecientes"?

GP: Everywhere we went. Because everywhere we were up there. I mean in Texas, even people living there that migrate over there and stayed over there, and bought a house.

DNR: What was one of the first out-of-state tours that you did after Beulah?

GP: The first tour ... that I made?

DNR: The first tour after Beulah hit, right, and then you went on tour again. Where did you go?

GP: The same route.

DNR: Oh, you went back to Phoenix, right?

GP: Right.

DNR: You had to honor the contract, and so you went back to Phoenix. So, did you play "Beulah" when you went back to Phoenix?

GP: Yes.

DNR: And then in California?

GP: Yes.

DNR: What part of California did you go to on that tour?

GP: Where we performed?

DNR: Where you performed.

GP: In California, we performed Sangre, in the Sangre ballroom, and Fresno, and San Jose, Watsonville, Stockton, Madera ... uh let's see ... Bakersfield. And, I think that was it ... ah, and then San Fernando. Also Marysville. We played a lot of places.

DNR: And, so all those stops "Las Crecientes" was on the ...

GP: But, not in one tour, you know. We played three places in one tour, but the next time around, about three months later, when we went through the same route, and played different halls.

DNR: And "Las Crecientes" was on the playlist for those tours for a few months?

GP: Yeah, for a while. And some places, where there were more Texans, you know, they requested even more than six months. People are funny, you know. Like today, they ask more for "El Dia de Tu Boda" the first recording I make. But, it's ... it all depends on the time when we were touring, and we were working pretty hard, you know. We had a lot of airplay. Conjunto had a lot of airplay. Of course, we worked areas like Michigan and Indiana, in states that there were no radio stations. The only way that they announced the dances was through flyers or telephone.

DNR: Do you still have some of the flyers?

GP: I'm sorry because I had a lot of flyers and when we moved from Mercedes to here, to el rancho, I had a big carton box full of the ...

DNR: the flyers

GP: And, I had a bunch of roaches in there.

DNR: Oh no!

GP: So, I burned them. I only saved a very few. And, also letters, when I used to perform live at KGBT. I had a lot of correspondence from Mexico, and all the way down to South America, even the Yucatán. People calling and asking for songs, you know. I hate to say this because I don't want to put nobody down. But, I was from the only group that received more requests, more letters. And you know what I burned all those letters, also. I should have saved them, my stamps for my museum now. I was young at the time, you know. My wife was the one that got careful and saved a lot of stuff. But, I wouldn't have done it without the help of my family, and my wife.

DNR: Now you're doing better archiving and saving the records of your music career.

GP: Uh huh.

DNR: That's good. We're almost getting done ... almost finished here. Two more questions. Well, this one's more of a ... I'm trying to figure this out. Because when we talked about "Las Crecientes" you said that you recorded it a few weeks after Beulah hit. Right?

GP: It was days, I think.

DNR: Days, okay. So, before the month was over, before September was done, "Las Crecientes" was there.

GP: Oh yes, oh yes.

DNR: It got pressed.

GP: Like I say, in one day it was done.

DNR: And then, I asked you if you had received any royalties, because I showed you all of those other concept albums.

GP: No, no. Because everything happened so quickly, and at the time, we were concentrating much on the contracts we had on the touring. That's where we made a little money, you know. And, I didn't take time to register the song. And the record shows the name of the composer. But somebody else was a little smarter than I was at the time. And they copyright it. Once it's copyright, it's copyright.

DNR: See. Look, look. (Rivera takes out printed photocopies selected from the 1968 Catalog of Copyright Entries available on the Internet) This is the catalog of copyright entries for July-December 1968.

GP: Was this before or after [inaudible]?

DNR: After. Because I remember you told me that what the record companies did was they would hold the songs until they got several dozen songs, and then at the end of the year, they would send them to get copyright.

GP: Right.

DNR: But, in the meantime, the sharks could come and do whatever they want with the song. So, I looked and "Las Crecientes" ... mira, right here. (Rivera points to and reads Perez the copyright entry for "Las Crecientes de Beulah") "Las Crecientes de Beulah" words and music, "w&m" It has Gilberto Perez. Two pages. Gilberto Perez. And, it was filed December 23, 1968. Over a year after.

GP: uh hmm...

DNR: So, it's there, and it's copy-written to you, but in the meantime, it seems like, during the whole year, those eleven or twelve months when it wasn't registered to you is when Falcon ...

GP: Somebody.

DNR: Bego, Fama ... took it. (Ideal, Bronco. Bego and Fama did not cover the recording.)

GP: Because a lot of those companies had their own ... what do you call it, they would copyright it. The record company. But, nowadays, there's a lot of people that they don't own the record company. It's just a company.

DNR: So, how did it get listed here? Did you send it off or did IDEAL send it? Because it's here. It's "Las Crecientes de Beulah" Gilberto Perez.

GP: It must have been Ideal.

DNR: Ideal sent it.

GP: Paco Betancourt.

DNR: Paco sent it off. But, at that point, it was too late? The other groups had already covered your song?

GP: Yes.

DNR: Gilberto Lopez covered it, and Freddie Gomez, I believe covered it.

GP: Did you mention something about Los Tigres on that song? Or was that a different song?

DNR: It was a different song. ... Is that what you think happened here, then? Because you got the copyright, but it was over a year later.

GP: Yeah.

DNR: And you didn't even know you had the copyright.

GP: No uh. Well, like I say, at the time, we were so busy running up and down. Going and coming and going and coming.

DNR: But, like you said, the bands were responsible for lining up the gigs ...

GP: Yes.

DNR: ... not the companies. They told you all "We'll record you, but you line up the gigs for yourself.

GP: I did ... that's how come ... but, a lot of companies did. Like Bego, Paulino Bernal, he would handle a lot of groups. And Mr. Cano, from across, you know, Servando Cano. He would fix all the tours for Ramon Ayala and Los Relampagos, and all those big groups at the time. But, I always worked by myself. That's how come there were songs that were written by us, and we didn't copyright them at the time, somebody else did.

DNR: On your behalf? Or, they copyrighted it and put it in their name?

GP: Because at the time, we didn't have computers, you know, and the first guys that had a copyright company, you know, or got ahold of BMI or Aztec, or whichever, they found out by computer it wasn't registered, it wasn't copyright, so they did it. And, there's nothing you can do. If you claim it, you have to go to court and everything, you know. So, we didn't bother, just write another, write another song. Keep it going.

DNR: And be smarter this time, copyright it quick.

GP: Right.

DNR: Okay, but this one, "Las Crecientes de Beulah," it is copywritten to you. But, it took over a year later, and you weren't aware?

GP: No, I wasn't aware.

DNR: So, Paco Betancourt from Ideal must have sent it off a year later?

GP: As it was recorded in *his* own company, we didn't get no royalties no nothing.

DNR: For Ideal, right? Ideal/Chico.

GP: It was our company at the time.

DNR: But, no royalties?

GP: No. (chuckles)

DNR: (chuckles)

GP: But ...

DNR: Ni modo. (Spanish idiom meaning: "It is what it is" or "Whatever".)

GP: We got publicity, and it kept us going. It kept us working. And, I would still be working if I could. I still do, but not as I used to. (laughs)

DNR: Okay. Here we go. This is the last question I wanted to ask you about "Las Crecientes de Beulah," because I didn't ask this, and I should have asked the first time, but that's the purpose of a follow-up interview – to ask follow-up questions. Why do you think, Mr. Perez, the people of the Rio Grande Valley, South Texas, Tamaulipas and elsewhere, why do you think it's important that we remember Hurricane Beulah and its aftermath fifty years later and into the future? Why is it so important to remember Hurricane Beulah and its aftermath?

GP: Why it is important to remember?

DNR: Yeah.

GP: Well, actually what's important to me is what you're doing right now. Like writing about it so people that wasn't even born yet, let's put it like that, you know, knows what happened, knows about history, knows about the history of our ... our territory here in the Valley, the Rio Grande Valley.

DNR: The community.

GP: The whole community, and South Texas, actually. That's the most important thing to me. Like, I had people from , ... people come and write about my group and what I've done, not only about Beulah. What I've done in other types of songs. Like when I wrote "Yo Quiero Volver," it's talking about the people that migrated and stayed over there, but they always wanted to be here. They always wanted to come back. That's how come it's called "Yo Quiero Volver," I want to go back home. So, that one is in Austin, written ... it's there, like with what you're doing here. But, if you go

through the library there in Austin, you'll find that song there. And, people know about the song itself.

DNR: It's the one where you're in the cotton field, right?

GP: Uh huh.

DNR: Yeah. The album.

GP: The album, right. And, well, there's more important things. Like for my family, you know. For my grandsons and so forth and so on, to remember about what happened about me and then what happened and what I did, you know. In my family, and who made me who I am, like the fans, you know, the public on both sides of the border. Because a lot of people from across say they appreciate what I do. And, like I mentioned a while ago, not only in Tamaulipas. It goes further down, further down, like when we used to play live in the radio station they can hear over there. So, I had a lot of correspondence, a lot of letters, a lot of dedications, a lot of pictures from people there. But, I'm not going to call me "stupido" (laughs). I got made because there was roaches all over the box, and so I put some kerosene, some gasoline or something on it, I forgot what. I just through a match on it and burned it up. I was burning the cucarachos, but I burned all my, my ...

DNR: Your papers, the flyers, the letters, the correspondence

GP: The letters. The letters were separate in different boxes, but I burned both of them. My wife told me, "Don't burn the boxes. Let's clean them." "No! I want to burn them." And, I was so busy when we first moved to this house here. Because it was nothing but field here, planting, you know, trees and everything, and cleaning up, and ... so I just took it over to the ditch there, and just light it up and burn it. But, I have a few.

DNR: That's good.

GB: But, not many.

DNR: But, at least there's some, there's a few.

GB: Yes.

DNR: That's good. So, Hurricane Beulah is important to remember as a way to document our community's history down here?

GP: Right, for history itself. History from here from the Valley, you know. And, uh ...

DNR: And what the people went through, particularly the Mexican-American community.

GP: They suffered a lot because at the time, you know, there wasn't the programs we have now.

DNR: Why do you think it's important that you grandchildren and your great-grand children know about Beulah?

GP: What's important?

DNR: Do you think it's important for your great-grand children to know about Beulah?

GP: Oh yes, yes. I don't want to ask you. But, I don't know what's your age, but you're interested.

DNR: I was born in 1981. So, I'm after Beulah by twelve or thirteen years.

GP: And see what you're doing. It's beautiful.

DNR: Okay.

GP: I respect you for that.

DNR: Thank you. I respect you for documenting Beulah (Laughs) with a corrido. It gives me a job.

GP: (Laughs) Right. Well, that's a reason that I considered, even at the time I considered letting people know what happened, and record it, so it will stay recorded, and the main thing was to do something different than what I had heard about the Hurricane. But, then, what about the crecientes? The floods? Let's write something about the crecientes. People suffered as bad or even worse. So, that's how come we did it, and that's how come you're here, and that's how come I get people from several places that want to do some biography, or something about different songs, verdad, or, about my group itself.

DNR: You leave a record of the history of the community and the significant events that shape our lives, and that we remember. Your recording left a record. Your record left a record.

GP: I recently, a couple years ago, I wrote a song that's called "La Ultima Pesada." It goes back to the, I would say from the 30s all the way to cotton picking time. Then, the machinery came and took over. But, when they started picking here, and they would go through the kineña, you know, through Kingsville picking cotton and all the way to Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri, and by that time it was just too cold and people were very tired and turned back. They came and some of them went to West Texas to do the pulley, they called it the pulley. And, then some came back home,

and some of them went there to finish the jornada (journey) the tour, or whatever. We called it campos, there were groups in trucks. So, I wrote a song about that.

DNR: What was the name of that song?

GP: At the last verse, when the introduction comes, I say "relató." I say the verses that you heard that I sing here they are not invented. This is the true facts of life, because I was a cotton picker also. I went through that.

DNR: Yeah, you know. What was the name of that song?

GP: "La Ultima Pesada" "The Last Weight" ... because the last weight was in West Texas.

DNR: And that's a canción, right? Not a corrido. Because it's in the canción style?

GP: It's not a corrdio. It's just a facts of life, true life. That's what I'd like to ... I'm still working on that, trying to write something about the real life, the real life of people, especially my people. And let's say the ending verse says, "At those times, when they got back it was very cold." And it says, It was very hard years for a lot of people of my race. Not all.

DNR: The working-class Mexicanos.

GP: Sí. Esos años fueron duros para muchos de mi raza. But, not everybody, cause, you know. But, we had a lot of people that migrate. And picking cotton is ... my father, and my brothers and sisters ... back in those years, you know, a lot of campos, campos de gente piscadora.

DNR: Okay. That finished the follow-up questions for Beulah. Alright. We're good, we're done for today. Thank you.