

La Bamba

by Emily Soares | March 09, 2009

La Bamba Born in the San Fernando Valley in 1941, Richard Steven Valenzuela had a love of music instilled in him early on. By the age of 5 he was interested in making his own music and was soon taking up guitar, trumpet and teaching himself the drums. At San Fernando High, his band, The Silhouettes, were the only rock band in the area and became local stars. As the film, *La Bamba* (1987) reveals, Valenzuela, soon to be "Valens" (played by Lou Diamond Phillips), was discovered by producer Bob Keane (Joe Pantoliano), of Del-If Records, and what happened next was an epic American success story, with tragedy to match in equal measure.

From start to finish, the amazing success of Ritchie Valens lasted for about eight months. During that time he had three Top 10 hits: "La Bamba", "Come On, Let's Go" and "Donna". It all ended with horrible abruptness when the small plane Valens was in went down in an Iowa cornfield with tour mates Buddy Holly and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson on February 3, 1959.

Just as Ritchie Valens shattered traditions by being the first Chicano to break into the pop music charts, the film version of his life did things a different way. *La Bamba*'s release, which included 64 Spanish-dubbed and 13 Spanish-subtitled prints across 30 cities nationwide, was the biggest of its kind at the time. Prior to that, Spanish-speaking Latinos would have to wait months for dubbed or subtitled prints produced for European and Latin American markets to come to their neighborhood theaters. For the first time, U.S. Spanish-and English-speaking populations would see the movie at the same time.

Ritchie Valens' family didn't work in the fields, as depicted in *La Bamba*, but director Luis Valdez's did, and it influenced him deeply. In 1965, Valdez founded El Tetra Compassion, a theatrical group rooted in Chicano experience and the cultural wing (at that time) of the United Farm Workers union. Valdez produced the hugely successful *Zoot Suit* (1981) on stage before it was made into a film. He became the first Chicano playwright to present a play on Broadway and continued breaking new ground with his films.

It wasn't easy to do a biopic on someone who had achieved relative sainthood in the nearly 30 years since his death. Valdez had trouble finding anything at all controversial about Valens, except through his brother, Bob (Esai Morales), who reluctantly admitted that they fought and blamed himself. Valdez used the brothers' difficult relationship and Bob's pain that Ritchie's father, who raised them both, was not his biological father as the underlying conflict in a story that wouldn't have much drama otherwise. Mario Barrera quotes Valdez in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, edited by Chon A. Noriega: "Ritchie represents the spirit of the fifties, the dream of everyman being able to cry out from his guts and rise to the top. His half-brother Bob was riddled with insecurity and he couldn't free himself to pursue his dreams — he was all caught up in self-doubt."

Valdez's projects have always involved the myth and mystery of Chicano culture, and *La Bamba* is no exception: "When I first pitched the idea for the screenplay, I told Taylor [Hackford] about...all the symbolism. He loved it. But [the mythic elements are] not overemphasized. It's part of the film's structure," says Valdez (*Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*).

Through the image of the snake, first shown in the film's opening shot and again when Ritchie and Bob visit the Tijuana curandero, who skins one and tells Ritchie the story of creation, Valdez offers references to the Aztec sky serpent, Quetzalcoatl, and its evil opposite—Tezcatlipoca, the envious and corrupting influence that eventually destroys Quetzalcoatl. This mythology frames the painful conflict between Ritchie and Bob: the success of the one seems unstoppable, except by the other, who can't get out of his own way. In Valdez's telling of Valens' tragic end, it is Bob who essentially kills his brother when he accidentally tears off the curandero's protective talisman Valens wears around his neck. Valens seems to feel what fate is coming his way throughout the film. From his reoccurring, grainy nightmare of a plane exploding over a junior high playground (which did actually kill Valens' childhood friend), to his intense fear of flying, Valens is stalked by premonition.

The music of *La Bamba* is performed memorably by Los Lobos, with some admirable lip-synching by Phillips. The film, which was considered a small indie production, did well among critics. Carlos Santana and Miles Goodman received the 1988 BMI Film Music Award and the film was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture Drama.

Producers: Bill Borden, Taylor Hackford
Director: Luis Valdez
Screenplay: Luis Valdez
Cinematography: Adam Greenberg
Music: Miles Goodman, Carlos Santana
Film Editing: Don Brochu, Sheldon Kahn
Cast: Lou Diamond Phillips (Ritchie Valens), Esai Morales (Bob Morales), Rosana DeSoto (Connie Valenzuela), Elizabeth Pena (Rosie Morales), Danielle von Zerneck (Donna Ludwig), Joe Pantoliano (Bob Keene), Rick Dees (Ted Quillen), Marshall Crenshaw (Buddy Holly), Howard Huntsberry (Jackie Wilson), Brian Setzer (Eddie Cochran), Daniel Valdez (Lelo), Felipe Cantu (Curandero), Eddie Frias (Chino), Mike Moroff (Mexican Ed), Geoffrey Rivas (Rudy).
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