



# MINORITIES RESOURCE AND RESEARCH CENTER NEWSLETTER

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## COUSIN JOE

by Harriet Ottenheimer

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*Cousin Joe, a blues singer from New Orleans, visited K-State in February to perform and discuss his music. Harriet Ottenheimer, assistant professor of anthropology, coordinated Joe's visit and is presently collaborating with him to write his autobiography.*

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The story of Cousin Joe's life is a fascinating account of the difficulties and opportunities involved in growing up and forging a career as a black musician in the South during this century. It is a personal record of the relation of a man and his music; it is also an oral history of a part of America's culture, through the eyes of one man.

Joe and I started working together in New Orleans in 1966; not on an autobiography at first. That came later. When we met I was a Ph.D. student in Anthropology at Tulane University, doing the field research for my dissertation. With interests in African-American culture and Ethnomusicology I wanted to explore the functions and the cultural contexts of blues singing in New Orleans. To do this, I was interviewing and spending time with as many blues singers and their families as I could, learning about their lives and their music. Joe taught me more than most and a few months after we began working together we decided to do his autobiography. By the end of that year he had dictated much of his life onto tape for me to edit. A summer grant from KSU will now enable me to complete the manuscript and prepare it for publication.

The excerpt that I have included here is from 1942. It encapsulates Joe's thoughts on a number of themes: the difficulties of breaking into the New York music scene, the relations between his lyrics and the ideas they express, and his thoughts on the creative process in general. It also highlights the communicative as well as the emotional nature of the blues.

Joe had been invited to New York to audition with the Inkspots, but they decided that his style did not match theirs. Not wanting to return home right away, he sought out his old friend from New

Orleans, Danny Barker, who was playing guitar in Cab Calloway's band. Danny introduced him to musicians, critics and record company representatives, and advised him to make himself as available as possible by spending all of his time on 52nd street. " 'Cause if you lookin' for a job you can't expect a job to come to you. You go out there. A lot of times, opportunity present itself and you have to be right there to grasp it. If you don't, well then, ain't nobody gonna bother lookin' for you—unless somebody recommend you, and you have to be real good for somebody to recommend you.

"Now, to make it in New York you had to write somethin' nobody ever heard before. And you had to write somethin' that wasn't even close to the idea of anybody else. Well, everybody was singin'



Cousin Joe

Photo by Holly Miller

about how beautiful a woman was and how much they loved her and what they would do for her and everything. So I just wrote the opposite: what I wouldn't do. Just to be different, that's all. Like I said,

I picked up on her conversation,  
Heard every word she said.  
She had on a twenty-five dollar hat,  
Sittin on a nickel head.

But now, when I sing in a club, sometimes I make an excuse to the ladies. I tell them ladies, 'I don't want y'all to get mad with me, now. It's only in the song.' In other words, I don't want them to think I'm sayin' that all the women ain't got no sense, see?

"I had to write it that way. Leonard Feather wrote about my songs in *Metronome*. Said that I was anti-social or something with women. That I was a woman-hater. But that's not so, 'cause at that time I had a lot of women. I was able to take care of myself. Take care of them, too. I wrote it that way just to be different.

"I wrote other kinds of things, too. Like I wrote this tune, *Lonesome Man*. When I wrote that tune I actually was a lonesome man. I mean, when I first got to New York I didn't know anybody. I was in this room all by myself. Little bitty room. You could hardly turn around in that rascal, but it was five dollars a week, so what the hell.

"Well I thought about it. I said, now, I really am a lonesome man. I started thinkin' 'bout that and then I started elaboratin' on it. I was so lonesome I wanted to go back home. So I started off like this:

Like the prodigal son, I believe I'll go back home. You know in the Bible, this man had three sons went in three different directions. Well two of 'em went in the right direction. The other one went in the wrong one, and when he realized he was in the wrong direction, then he wanted to go back home. Things didn't work out alright for him. So I said,

Like the prodigal son, I believe I'll go back home,  
And I'm gonna tell my baby that I'm sorry that I done wrong.

Somethin' like that. I'm sort of apologizin' for what I did so she can accept me back home, see? And then I said,

If you ever been lonesome, then you know just how I feel,  
I can't even wake up in the morning and buy myself a decent meal.

I didn't have no job at the time and I didn't have no money. I had pawned my guitar for fifty dollars—a five hundred dollar guitar. Pawned it for fifty dollars. I had brought eight or ten suits with me,



Cousin Joe

Photo by Holly Miller

too, and I pawned about eight of them before I'd made some connections. That's the kind of predicament I was in so I wrote somethin' according to the lonesome life I led. I said,

If I could catch a freight train, I'm goin' back home,  
I'm goin' back home because I'm tired of sleepin' all alone.

Even if I don't get my fare, you know, and if I got to hobo back home—I'm goin' back home. That's how I felt.

"And you know the main thing inspired me to write the tune was Little Eva. And then she came up there. And I was in this predicament when she came up there. She was under the impression I was working all the time and I was not working. She hadn't heard from me so she came up. She came up to New York.

"Now as long as I wasn't doin' nothin', as long as I wasn't working, I didn't want to write to Eva. I didn't want to worry her to know how conditions were 'cause she'd 've wanted me to come right back home. She'd 've sent me money to come back home. But the thing about it is—I didn't want to let her know. My pride stopped me from letting her know anything. I'd say, 'I'm a man. I'm supposed to be able to take it.'

"Well, I come to my room one morning, I come from being downtown, and I open my door and I smell perfume. I didn't put the light on, but I

said, 'Now, some woman is in my room 'cause I don't use that kind of perfume. And I ain't never had a woman round my room before. Somebody is in here.' And she didn't say nothin', she's just laying there. Well, I put the light on and . . . Now I don't know if she was trying to catch me at somethin' or if she just wanted to surprise me 'cause I hadn't written to her. But she sure surprised me. I'd 've met her at the station if I knew she was comin'.

"I got her a job on 50th and Broadway in a hamburger stand. I went over there and talked to the man on the corner. He knew me and Sonny Greer, we used to pass by there all the time. Sonny was in Duke Ellington's band and he was my closest buddy.

"So then Eva and I stayed there. An in that little room, that bunk was so small that what we did was—half the night she was sleepin' on me, other half the night I slept on her."

Not long after Eva came, Joe was hanging out at a black-owned nightclub called the Spotlight and jazz critic Leonard Feather asked him to sing.

"The way I was, away from home and wantin' me a job, I put everything I had into it." Earl Hines played piano and Feather was so impressed with Joe's singing that a recording date was arranged right away. Joe was singing and began to find jobs and make money. Eva returned to New Orleans and her children.



## LUPE VALENTI

by David W. Hacker

On a recent Sunday afternoon, the 45-member KSU Symphony gathered in its rehearsal room at McCain Auditorium. At the podium was Mischa Semanitzky. Next to the former assistant conductor of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Symphony was a little known Chicana singer from Brownsville, Texas. Her name was Lupe Valenti.

"She's not actively singing now," said Semanitzky, presently the conductor of the K-State Symphony. "But she has done a lot of performing in Texas and Mexico.

How Ms. Valenti came to be in Manhattan, Kansas on this Sunday, January 27 is an unusual story that shows the breadth and the scope of K-State's reach. For Ms. Valenti had come to record a song she had written. The title was "Por Los Caminos," or roughly translated, "Along the Byways." It's 2½ minutes long, and has flashes of the rhythms and sounds familiar to Mexican music. When a visitor to the music department

heard the song, he was instantly carried to La Cucaracha (The Cockroach), a small bar off the square in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, where guitarists (usually American) sit and pick and hum and lament and wish musically for other things.

Valenti's voice is a slightly off-tilt contralto, husky, well textured by its 40-plus years. She taped her song in both Spanish and English, taking the originals with her—to do what with neither Semanitzky nor anyone else at K-State knows. For this is the oddity of the story: Valenti wanted to record her tune with a full orchestra.

"It's unusual, quite unusual," said Semanitzky. "I suspect that's why she wanted to do it—something very different."

For Valenti is not an opera singer nor a classical one. She is, said Semanitzky, a nightclub singer, and "Por Los Caminos" is what you'd hear at a small Texas Mexican American supper club.

It's like a little leaguer renting Yankee Stadium and having the Yankees back him up as he pitches an inning against the Kansas City Royals. Or George Plimpton boxing Rocky Marciano. Or a Sunday school soprano singing in Carnegie Hall.

It couldn't happen, but it did.

And how it did came about this way: When Semanitzky lived in Pittsburg he became friends with Arnaldo Sierra, now a retired musician. Sierra originally was from Brownsville, Texas. He, in turn, was a friend of Lupe Valenti. Last year, Semanitzky was visiting Sierra in Brownsville and met Valenti at a dinner. When she learned what Semanitzky did for a living, she proposed that his symphony background her song. She sent it to him, and Semanitzky then sent it to Sierra to arrange. She has made several records and "Por Los Caminos" may be a future issue.

For the January 27 "premiere," Valenti and a friend drove to Manhattan from Brownsville; Sierra came by bus. Valenti's appearance at K-State was unpublicized, but for Semanitzky and Kansas State the visit won't be forgotten. Lupe Valenti, a Chicana nightclub singer donated a modest sum to the music department's scholarship fund. It was her way of saying thanks for the help and thanks for listening.

*David W. Hacker is a visiting professor in the department of Journalism and Mass Communications.*



# NEW ACQUISITIONS



## BOOKS

**"His Own Where"** by June Jordan. Her first novel—about a boy determined to make life work for him and his girl when all the rules say it cannot.

**"Yes Is Better Than No"** by Byrd Baylor. A comic novel about the Papago Indians living in Tucson, Arizona, and their attempts to survive in the modern urban world.

**"Black Students on White Campuses: The Impacts of Increased Black Enrollments."** A detailed look at the responsiveness of 13 institutions to increased black enrollments. It looks at the impacts of minority enrollment on the institution—what kinds of changes took place and who felt the greatest effect because of the changes. It also pinpoints the reasons for the success or failure of minority programs among the various schools.

## REFERENCE BOOKS

**"Chicano Scholars and Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Directory"** edited and compiled by Julio Martinez. Data on Chicano scholars and writers working in the fields of the humanities, the social sciences and education. Includes alphabetical listing and subject index.

## PERIODICALS

**"Maize Notebooks of Xicano Art and Literature."** A collection of Chicano poetry, short stories, photographs and graphics.

**"A, A Journal of Contemporary Literature."** Features poetry, graphics, reviews, essays and articles by third world writers and artists.

**"SEZ, A Multi-Racial Journal of Poetry and Peoples Culture."** Focuses on literature and artwork from the working class and from communities which are cut off from mainstream America. Published by Shadow Press, USA.

## FILMS

**"The Writer in America: Toni Morrison"** produced and directed by Richard O. Moore. A biographical digest and creative profile of one of America's foremost novelists. 28 minutes. Color.



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