



Introduction to Juan Felipe Herrera. 1:19 min. Interview: Raymond Elman. Camera: Lee Skye. Editing & Production: Rosanna Oviedo + Jennifer Chang. Recorded: 11/18/2018, Miami Book Fair.

A Conversation with U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera

By Elman + Skye + Oviedo + J. Chang + Jones

JUAN FELIPE HERRERA was born in Fowler, California, in 1948. The son of migrant farmers, Herrera moved often, living in trailers or tents along the roads of the San Joaquin Valley in Southern California. As a child, he attended school in a variety of small towns from San Francisco to San Diego. He began drawing cartoons while in middle school, and by high school was playing folk music written by Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie.

Herrera graduated from San Diego High in 1967, and was one of the first wave of Chicanos to receive an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) scholarship to attend UCLA. There, he became immersed in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, and began performing in experimental theater, influenced by Allen Ginsberg and Luis Valdez.

In 1972, Herrera received a BA in Social Anthropology from UCLA. He received a masters in Social Anthropology from Stanford in 1980, and went on to earn a MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1990.

His interests in indigenous cultures inspired him to lead a formal Chicano trek to Mexican Indian villages, from the rain forest of Chiapas to the mountains of Nayarit. The experience greatly changed him as an artist. His work, which includes video, photography, theater, poetry, prose, and performance, has made Herrera a leading voice on the Mexican American and indigenous experience.

Herrera is the author of many collections of poetry, including *Notes on the Assemblage* (City Lights, 2015); *Senegal Taxi* (University of Arizona Press, 2013); *Half of the World in Light: New and Selected Poems* (University of Arizona Press, 2008); *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross The Border: Undocuments 1971-2007* (City Lights, 2007); and *Crashboomlove* (University of New Mexico Press, 1999), a novel in verse, which received the Americas Award. He is a recipient of the PEN/Beyond Margins Award and a National Book Critics Circle Award

His books of prose for children include: *Jabberwalking* (Candlewick, 2018), which won an International Latino Book Award; *Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes* (Dial Books, 2014); *SkateFate* (Rayo, 2011); *Calling The Doves* (Children's Book, 2001); *The Upside Down Boy* (2006), which was adapted into a musical in New York City; *Cinnamon Girl: Letters Found Inside a Cereal Box* (HarperCollins, 2005), which tells the tragedy of 9/11 through the eyes of a young Puerto Rican girl; and *Imagine* (Candlewick, 2018).

Ilan Stavans, the Mexican American essayist, has said: "There is one constant over the past three decades in Chicano literature and his name is Juan Felipe Herrera. Aesthetically, he leaps over so many canons that he winds up on the outer limits of urban song. And spiritually, he is deep into the quest that we all must begin before it is too late."

In a profile of Herrera in the *New York Times*, Stephen Burt wrote: "Many poets since the 1960s have dreamed of a new hybrid art, part oral, part written, part English, part something else: an art grounded in ethnic identity, fueled by collective pride, yet irreducibly individual too. Many poets have tried to create such an art: Herrera is one of the first to succeed."

Herrera has received fellowships and grants from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Stanford Chicano Fellows Program, and the University of California at Berkeley. In 2015, he received the L.A. Times Book Prize's Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement.

Over the past three decades, he has founded a number of performance ensembles, and has taught poetry, art, and performance in community art galleries and correctional facilities. He has taught at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and served as chair of the Chicano and Latin American Studies Department at CSU-Fresno.

In 2015, Herrera was named Poet Laureate of the United States, for which he launched the project La Casa de Colores, which invites citizens to contribute to an epic poem. Herrera is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Fresno and UC Riverside. He also holds honorary degrees from California State University, Fresno, Skidmore College, and Oregon State University. He served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2011 to 2016.

He is the father of five children, and lives in Fresno, California, with his partner, the poet and performance artist, Margarita Robles.

The videos below are organized by topic and run between 2 to 7 minutes. Click on any video. You must be connected to the internet to view the videos.

DEVELOP A VOICE: 6:19 min.



What was the impact on you when you became Poet Laureate of the United States?

EMPATHY: 4:06 min.



How has your voice evolved?

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION:

3:55 min.



When did you start thinking that you might be a writer for the rest of your life?

COLLABORATION: 2:40 min.



Your poems give hope to the Latino community and educate the Anglo community. Do you have different messages for different audiences?