

¡CON CLAVE!

by María R. Salazar

Chata Gutierrez, ¡Presente!



I don't know if there is a heaven after we are done with this organic world, but I do know that while I walked this earth, I experienced *un ambiente* that felt like heaven. It made me hope real hard that a dance floor featuring *lo mejor de salsa* and being surrounded by *todo el mundo* is, indeed, heaven.

Ese ambiente had it all! There was love, drama, *ganas*, *gritos*, *risas*, *romancé*, y *más drama*. *Los políticos llegaron y siempre los amantes bailaron* and the butches, who didn't dance much, stood firm tapping their glass with a pinky ring to a good Caribbean beat. In the booth, the DJ inspired every sway, every dip, every glide, every spin! It was beautiful. We were there, with our desires, our fears, our sexuality, our ambitions, our pain, our sensuality and our hearts. It was rare to find the fullness of us in one space and even rarer to be in commune with *todo el mundo*. By *todo el mundo* I mean *las mujeres*, *los guapos*, *las machas*, *los jotos*, *los muchachos*, *los ricos*, *los pobres*, *pués la familia*, *todos juntos*. *Un cielo bonito*. But it happened with a salsa rhythm while the DJ carried this message, "*se hace con clave*." Clap your hands to that simple beat, "*porque se hace con clave*."

I was there. It was beautiful.

This *ambiente* was a gift to me. When I think of this gathering of *todo el mundo*, my heart swells with pure, unapologetic joy. The DJ creating *un cielo bonito* was music legend, Micaela "Chata" Gutierrez. I am so grateful that Chata spent forty years+ creating these moments of *un cielo bonito*. And it wasn't just on the dance floor, cuz for some forty+ years, Chata brought this magic to us every Saturday from noon to 3pm with the radio program of "Con Clave", a ground-breaking line-up she conceptualized in the mid 1970's which materialized to an award-winning program for San Francisco's community and public radio stations of KPOO and KPFA.

That program put out some of the tracks found not only in the soundtrack of my life but in the community of *gente* of San Francisco and well beyond the confines of state lines y *la frontera*. You could hear Chata's music vision playing in the bookstores on Valencia Street in San Francisco's Mission District and even at the Esperanza Center when she was a featured artist for *MujerCanto*, the year 1999, (I think).

I got the chance to shuttle Chata around San Antonio when she played *música* at the Esperanza. I think she took great delight in getting all these Tejanos onto the dance floor. I know she was overjoyed when she found that Enrique and Isabel Sánchez (the parents of Graciela Sánchez, the Director at the Esperanza Center) were such avid fans of *salsa*, *el son* y *merengue*. When I drove her from place to place, I asked Chata where she got her

shoes, cuz Chata was a dapper dresser and I confessed that when I lived in San Francisco, I paid attention to her fashion —cuz, she had style! She laughed and said, "go with what you like, be comfortable y *te miras bien*." And then she said, "don't be afraid to be who you are cuz in the end, it makes us all liars and we can't live as liars. It kills us." She never did tell me where she got her shoes.

As I drove her around, we listened to a local station and she would say the music of *rancheras* y *boleros* reminded her of her family growing up in the San Francisco's Mission District. (Chata's family immigrated to the United States from the state of Michoacán in México). I asked her then where she got her love for salsa music and she said she didn't know, she just loved it, she loved all music. She loved how it brought people together. At the dance, I was right! The featured host, Chata, packed the house! The top floor was full; it felt like everyone in San Antonio was there! And there it was again, *otro momento con ese ambiente*. It felt like *un cielo bonito* —*todo el mundo* was right there! We danced. All of us, the lovers, the deceived, the dreamers, the artists, *los políticos*, the believers, *los viejitos* y *también los niños* —*un cielo bonito*.

We lost Chata to cancer on December 17, 2013. She battled it for some 12 years. Stupid cancer. I was saddened to hear of her passing. My heart bled grief. Chata was a proud Chicana, fierce lesbiana who could bring us together in one spot in great commune with her mix of music. I am sad that those moments of *un cielo bonito* won't be experienced here in this organic world again. But when I hear "*La Vida Es Un Carnaval*" (Celia Cruz), "*Vivir Lo Nuestro*" (La India), *Bailando* (Frankie Ruiz), "*El Gran Varón*" (Willie Colón), or one of my favorites, "*La Rebelión*" (Joe Arroyo) — I know I was given a gift, y *doy las gracias*. And, I remember that message Chata had for *ese cielo bonito*... *¡Se hace con clave!*

Que descanse en paz.

¡Con clave!

Chata Gutierrez, ¡Presente!

To honor Micaela "Chata" Gutierrez, you can make a contribution in her name to KPOO Radio

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