

## Rene Valdez

### Praying for Freedom<sup>4</sup>

Sliding past first line of personnel,  
We are lead down a hall.  
Us – a ragtag army carrying bent pens, torn paper,  
& an upright bass.

Thick steel doors with small rectangular windows  
Separate us from locked-up Black & Brown youth.

With a simple turn of their skeleton key,  
We enter a chamber  
Where they do their time.

*-Are you locked up or locked down?* Jonathan asks  
Eyes light up.  
We feel the buzz –  
the anticipation & excitement  
ritualizing the elements of humanity thru sound  
and vibration.

Scratching symbols on paper,  
praying for freedom –  
freedom from this madness,  
letting go of this sadness.

we tell them who we are and why we are there –  
*-to learn how to be human again- . . .*

*-are we not human?* one youth asks.

*-if they thought you was human would you really be here?-*  
is what I want to tell him but “staff” sits there --

Just Watching.

Watching every move, listening to every word  
& note.

*-That's my rhythm-* a young Mexica says enraptured,  
Smiling as fingers thump a sick Coltrane bass line:

*A Love Supreme. A Love Supreme.*

Breaks thru this thick smoke of violence & abuse

of *yes-Sir's* and *no-Sir's* and *can-I-get-up-to-get-my-notebook-Sir* and *can-I-get-up-to-go-to-the-john-Sir* and DO WHAT I SAY AS SOON AS I SAY OR GO TO STRAIGHT TO SOLITARY.

raw bass sounds disturb this physical and spiritual brutality,  
*awakening consciousness—*  
shakin'em up outta bondage.

Time is suspended getting at the cut of eternity.  
Rhythms - wordsnotes - chants — prayers, for a moment,

Breathe . . .

We Shape-shift into spiritual vessels:

Spitting their slang about surviving the streets,  
Hustling for a quick dime  
Busting into homes on the run.

In there they don't get to feel the sun on their skin.

Our circle is broken by random searches --  
rummaging thru their personal belongings,  
looking between mattresses,  
pulling up the sheets,  
even thumbing thru notebooks  
and underwear.

We tell them to focus  
on words  
and rhythm.

*They can't corrupt our circle of strength—* I tell them.

They find nothing — no weapons,  
no drugs,

no contraband.

Just family photos  
and letters folded in books.

One of the Chicanitos reflects, *-for some strange reason,*  
*the music "goes" with the searches,*  
*like in a movie . . . -*

keep goin'

and the cipher continues

like Black improvisational music.

what is it?

A Coltrane solo as a form of freestylin'.

Uninterrupted laughter.

a young brother tell us the music calms him.

— Rene Valdez

<sup>4</sup>A work-in-progress from the perspective of facilitator, Fall 2009,