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## Remembering Hurricane Beulah: An Interview With Conjunto Legend Gilberto Perez On Hurricane Beulah Corridos, Commercialism and Culture

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# REMEMBERING HURRICANE BEULAH: AN INTERVIEW WITH CONJUNTO LEGEND GILBERTO PEREZ ON HURRICANE BEULAH CORRIDOS, COMMERCIALISM AND CULTURE

by *Diana Noreen Rivera*<sup>1</sup>

Conjunto music legend Gilberto Perez, born in Mercedes, Texas, in 1935, has enjoyed a long and prestigious career as a singer and accordionist. With over sixty years of performing, initially alongside conjunto great Ruben Vela, and then with his own group Gilberto Perez y Sus Compadres starting in 1959, Perez has recorded to date over five hundred songs, released over fifty albums, has over thirty songwriting credits to his name, and has recorded for historic Mexican-American recording companies Falcon (McAllen, Texas), Ideal (San Benito, Texas), long-running south Texas regional labels Freddie (Corpus Christi, Texas), Hacienda (Corpus Christi), JB (San Antonio, Texas), and his now-defunct label Nuevo, to name a few. The Smithsonian Institute honored Perez in 1999 for his contribution to the diffusion of culture and tradition, and he was a 2003 inductee into the Texas Conjunto Music Hall of Fame and Museum in San Benito.

I had the privilege of interviewing Gilberto Perez for nearly three hours of audiotaped conversation recorded at his home on the northern outskirts of Mercedes, during two separate sessions on June 27, 2017 and July 24, 2017. The purpose of the second session was to ask follow-up questions. While some highlights of our discussion include recollections of his boyhood, migrant labor in Mississippi, and memorable experiences at the early and later stages of his music career, the central topic of our discussion was Perez's corrido "Las Crecientes de Beulah" ["The Floods of Beulah"], which narrates the landfall and destructive aftermath of Hurricane Beulah in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Tamaulipas border communities.<sup>1</sup> I edited the transcription that appears here to reflect this focus, and to complement this interview I provide a transcription of "Las Crecientes de Beulah's" Spanish lyrics and an English translation, with Perez's review and approval.

"Las Crecientes de Beulah" was co-written by Gilberto Perez and his band mates Alejandro Perez, Cruz Gonzalez, and Raul Garza several days after Beulah made landfall on September 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of 1967 and recorded as a 45 rpm at music producer Paco Betancourt's recording studio in San Benito under the



*Gilberto Perez, 2017. At his home in Mercedes, TX. To the lower-right of Perez propped on the couch is a portrait of Perez at the age of fifteen. Photograph by Diana Noreen Rivera.*

Chico record label, which was a co-owned venture by Perez and Betancourt that lasted for one year.<sup>2</sup> As a corrido, complete with octosyllabic quatrains, abcb rhyme scheme, and a narrative structure that includes a traditional opening movement situating the place and time of the event and a formal despedida [singer's farewell], "Las Crecientes de Beulah" is a significant form of expressive culture. It adds to the historical literary production of Hurricane Beulah documented in newspaper and magazine articles, government reports, and speeches by public officials that transpired shortly before and in the wake of the devastating Hurricane.

Hurricane Beulah made landfall near the mouth of the Rio Grande and inundated both Texas and Tamaulipas border communities with tremendous, levee-bursting floodwaters stemming from the swollen Rio Grande.<sup>3</sup> This resulted in a substantial amount of bi-national cooperation that included the admittance of an estimated 15,000 Mexican refugees into shelters across the Rio Grande Valley and strategic cuts to levees by Mexico and the U.S. to ease cresting in the area of Brownsville and Matamoros.<sup>4</sup> However, the story of Hurricane Beulah as a transnational disaster and relief effort was lost on some popular national media outlets, like Life magazine's "The Baleful Toll of Hurricane Beulah," a photo-journalistic piece telling of Beulah's merciless economic devastation "between Brownsville and Houston" (1967, 34). "Las Crecientes de Beulah" maintains a sustained narration of Hurricane Beulah as a transnational disaster. As such it follows the corrido's function as a genre expressing the viewpoints of marginalized communities, which stand in opposition to dominant perspectives (Hernández 2012, 176). As Gilberto Perez candidly shares in his remembrances of Beulah's aftermath and in his discussion of the lyric's significance, the corrido was a product of his and his conjunto's personal experiences and the news they received from local radio broadcasts and newspapers. Perez also expresses that "Las Crecientes de Beulah" was written with an intention to inform the "Spanish-speaking" listeners of their music to what happened to people on both sides of US-Mexico border. He recalls playing "Las Crecientes de Beulah" upon request in Laredo, Texas, in Arizona and California, and mentions that radio block programs on KGBT playing conjunto music transmitted transnationally over the airwaves deep into Mexico. Therefore, the corrido's basis of personal experience, transborder narration, and intended audience mark it as a key literary production that expresses a local, Mexican-American cultural perspective of Beulah and its aftermath to transnational communities of Mexican descent within the state of Texas and beyond its borders.

Moreover, and of interest to scholars of corrido studies, “Las Crecientes de Beulah,” as one of several corridos written in south Texas on the topic of Hurricane Beulah, follows in the rich tradition of what early corrido scholars Vicente T. Mendoza and Aurora Lucero White respectively recognized as a specific type – corridos that narrate “desastres” [disasters] and “catastrophe” (Mendoza 1954 and Lucero White 1937).<sup>5</sup> The south Texas region has long been associated with productions of the masculine, heroic border corrido of cultural conflict represented by the paradigmatic “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” as a result of influential scholarship by Américo Paredes (1958, 1976, 1979), José Limon (1992), José David Saldívar (1986), Ramon Saldívar (1990), and John H. McDowell (1981). “Las Crecientes de Beulah” diversifies canonical assumptions of corrido production in the south Texas region and gives the literary and anthropological scholar of corridos pause to question – Who is assigned the role of the heroic Mexicano “with his pistol in his hand,” when the antagonistic force is a destructive hurricane? The subject of this question and a discussion of other corridos narrating Hurricane Beulah produced by several recording companies are addressed in the interview, because, as Perez sharply reveals in his conversation, the production of “Las Crecientes de Beulah” was at once culturally and commercially significant. Adding another layer to the complexity of Cathy Ragland’s discussion on conjunto as a “cultural mediator or a commercial commodity” (2001, 223) and to conversations on the corrido’s commodification held by Paredes, Jesus “Chuy” Negrete, and Dan Dickey (1981), Elijah Wald (2000), Margaret Dorsey (2006) and Martha Chew Sanchez (2006), Perez details the effects of the commercialized conjunto recording industry on the production of “Las Crecientes de Beulah.” Following the mandates of Ideal’s co-owner and studio manager Johnny Phillips and limited by time constraints of 45s and jukeboxes, Perez discusses the artistic sacrifices his group Gilberto Perez y Sus Compadres made as a result of the profit-driven conjunto market of the late-1960s. Furthermore, while Perez was aware that fellow conjunto legend Agapito Zuniga had written “Tragedia de Beulah,” he was unaware at the time of the interview that several other Hurricane Beulah corridos and concept albums had been recorded by other labels, some of which covered his group’s “Las Crecientes de Beulah.” In what can be viewed as conjunto disaster commercialism upon my presentation of a Hurricane Beulah discography to Perez,<sup>6</sup> our discussion turned to the role of competition in the conjunto industry at the time, copyright concerns, and mechanical royalties Perez says he did not receive when “Las Crecientes de Beulah” was covered by conjunto artists under different record labels.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars of literature will appreciate Perez’s responses to questions on the lyrical interpretation of “Las Crecientes de Beulah.” Anthropologists and musicologists will find important Perez’s recollections on the instrumentation and the process of “Las Crecientes de Beulah’s” production as well as Perez’s sound memory for names of Rio Grande Valley disc jockeys and dance-hall promoters he encountered on the conjunto circuit when Gilberto Perez y Sus Compadres returned to Arizona and California in the months following Hurricane Beulah’s landfall. Historians specializing in the region of south Texas and those invested in disaster studies will also appreciate the knowledge Perez offers about this influential and unforgettable weather-event on his personal and professional life. What becomes clear from Perez’s discussion is that he and his conjunto, with the production of “Las Crecientes de Beulah,” created an invaluable record of events commanded by commercial interests that narrate the transborder concerns predominating much of Mexican-American experience.

*Diana Noreen Rivera (DNR): Okay. So, we'll talk about Hurricane Beulah now.*

Gilberto Perez: Okay.

*DNR: It was a powerful hurricane. It started in the eastern Caribbean, and it did a lot of damage to the Caribbean Islands and people died in the Caribbean. Then, it came across the Yucatán Peninsula, and there was a lot of flooding there and death. And then, of course, Beulah came straight to the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>8</sup>*

GP: Straight to Brownsville.

*DNR: Do you remember when you first heard about Beulah?*

GP: Yes, at the time, when we were touring it was back in 1967, we were on a tour going towards California. And, we stopped at Phoenix, Arizona. It was our first leg, we played there for two or three days and then we had to go. And, during those three days is when Beulah hit. And, we lost communication there, you know. And, so we decided to turn back because of the news. They sounded like Beulah was going to wipeout the Valley, you know.

*DNR: What were the news stations that you were listening to when you were in Phoenix?*

GP: While in Phoenix, for the radio stations, it was a couple of Spanish radio stations at the time. I remember KFIN in Phoenix.

*DNR: And at that point, you're a family man. Right?*

GP: My family was here [Mercedes, TX]. And at that point we had a one-year old boy ... our youngest son. So, I told the man there in Phoenix, "Call the guy in California. I'm going to turn back." So, we came back. We had a hard time coming back to the Valley because it was flooded.

*DNR: Do you remember name of the man in Phoenix and the promoter in California?*

GP: Yes. Our promoter in Phoenix, Arizona ... Calderón was his last name. And, we were going to move from there to California with Arnulfo Delgado. They called him "El Gordo Delgado." [The Fat Thin] His name was Delgado, but he was kind of fat.<sup>9</sup> [Laughs] And Mr. Calderón's name was Leonardo Calderón. Calderón's ballroom in Phoenix, at the time, was the most famous and the biggest place in town.

*DNR: And, was Mr. Calderón upset? Or, did he understand?*

GP: Well, he understood, you know. He also heard the news and knew what was happening.

*DNR: Who were your band-mates that made up Gilberto Perez y Sus Compadres, at the time?*

GP: It was the original Gilberto Perez y Sus Compadres group. It was made by myself and Ramón Medina, and Cruz Gonzalez Jr. and Alejandro Perez, my brother. I'm sorry I forgot to mention Raul Garza. He was in the band while coming back from Phoenix.

*DNR: Did you take Hwy 281 through Falfurrias? Or, were you trying to go through Hwy 77?*

GP: No, through Laredo, down [Hwy] 83. We came through Del Rio and all the way down. But, the worst was Rio Grande City. It was very flooded. But, they had tractors pulling the cars across, and we finally made it. And, so, thank God my family was okay ... our families with all the guys in the group. And so, the radio started playing a corrido by Agapito Zuniga. He was pretty popular at the time ... a corrido about Beulah ... the hurricane. So, we started thinking. Well, what happened after Beulah? Las crecientes, the floodings. So, we got together and said, "Let's make a corrido about the crecientes." Because the crecientes [floods] were pretty bad.

*DNR: Before we talk about your corrido "Las Crecientes de Beulah" and the other corridos conjunto artists created in response to Hurricane Beulah, can you tell me more about what it was like to drive through the flooding? Did they have to push your car?*

GP: No. We were driving a station wagon with a trailer pulling the instruments. The water was too high. And we even heard the fan hitting the water, but we went so slow through the water. We made it across a few places that were flooded. Thank God we made it. We didn't have to get pulled or nothing.

*DNR: That's good.*

GP: We had a smart driver. [Chuckles]

*DNR: How high did the water come up to the car?*

GP: Well, we got it inside the station wagon. I remember there was a telephone pole coming. We were driving like that through the water, you know, as we saw a telephone post coming, and I told Medina, he was driving, I said, "Stop here." He said, "Why?" "Stop. Look at that telephone post coming toward us! We're going to make it there at the same time." So, we stopped. And, sure enough the telephone post went by. And then he started again, and I said, "Stop again." "Why?" I was looking, and there was a butane tank floating. A big one! About a two hundred-pound butane tank floating in the water. It must have been empty. But, it passed right in front of us, sure enough.

*DNR: In Starr County?*

GP: Yes, in Starr County. It was between Rio Grande and Mission, in that area.

*DNR: Can you talk more about what it was like to see Mercedes?*

GP: It was kind of sad, you know, when we got to Mercedes. There was only one bridge at the time coming across the flood levees. And, when we finally got there we had a hard time because there was water outside the floodways and the Llano Grande.<sup>10</sup>

*DNR: When you crossed the bridge was the water right up to the highway?*

GP: Yes, it was almost hitting the top of the bridge. And the railroad track that went across, you could hardly

see it. It was lower than the bridge. But, by that time we had contacted our families, and they were safe. Thank God. My wife and the kids went with one of my brothers. He used to live in the city apartments. They were safe.

*DNR: Off of Texas Blvd. or Vermont?*

GP: Vermont. The Las Palmas Apartments. He was living there, one of my brothers. So, they stayed there during the chubasco<sup>11</sup> [hurricane]. Then when Beulah left and I got back, we moved back to the house. And, thank God, it didn't tear up our house. Of course, the roof was tore up some, but not too bad, you know. Because in the town there's a lot of houses, and a lot of wind breakers. But, a little before the levee broke, or the gates towards the Arroyo Colorado, we were checking the floodways. And, it kept building up, building up, building up. Me and my brother went to Mile 12 and hit the levees on the other side. And, we marked how much it was going up, and that's when I really got scared, you know. But then the news hit the radio that the levees had broken and the water went towards La Feria. And Harlingen.<sup>12</sup> So, it was a relief for us, but it was bad for those poor people who got hurt. That's how come we added that in the corrido, that Harlingen and Rio Hondo and La Feria got hit the worst from the crecientes [floods].

*DNR: Did you see the boys putting sandbags on the levees in Mercedes?*

GP: Yes, yes. It mentions in the corrido, too, that a lot of people worked on the levees trying to save Mercedes, but the levees broke. It's all told in the corrido.

*DNR: Let's talk about the Hurricane Beulah corridos now. Agapito's (Zuniga's) song "Tragedia de Beulah" starts with a wind sound effect ...*

GP: When we recorded that it ["Las Crecientes de Beulah"] we made a sound of water.

*DNR: Yes. How did you make that sound?*

GP: In the restroom. [Laughs] With the sink.

*DNR: Can you talk more about how "Las Crecientes de Beulah" was created?*

GP: We were in the studio. And, I told the guy that ran the studio over there in Ideal Records and Chico Records we were going to record. And, he said, "Hey, what are you doing?" I said, "We're going to write a tragedia or corrido about the crecientes of Beulah." He said, "Hey, that's sounds pretty good." So, he stopped the recording session. "No, you work on that," he said.

*DNR: And, who was this person?*

GP: The owner was Paco Betancourt, but his nephew, his name was Johnny Phillips. He was the one that ran the studio, and he was part owner of Ideal Records.

GP: So, we stayed there all the evening, and we stayed till, I don't know, two or three o'clock in the morning. And, we left a sample there, and we wrote it. It was me and Alejandro my brother, and my compadre Cruz Gonzalez who was the drummer, and Raul Garza who was the MC, he used to sing also with the group. I

mentioned compadre Medina, but he wasn't there. We went back the next day because he [Johnny Phillips] called us and said, "Hey, come and record this because it sounds pretty good, and I have the sampler here." So, we went back and compadre [Medina] didn't show up, and this guy was pushing me, saying "Come on, let's do it."

*DNR: He [Johnny Phillips] wanted to get it down.*

GP: Yeah. So, Johnny was the one that was pushing us, you know, because they had the record pressers over there. They'd press 45s and 78s, and albums also. So, we needed a bajo sexto, and we couldn't get nobody. So, my brother said, "Yeah, I'll play the bajo sexto, just make it slow." And then, [laughs] a guy was walking by, and Chuy Villegas was there. He was a good accordionist friend of mine. He [Chuy Villegas] called this guy and said, "Hey, come over here, Pete Benavides." Chuy said, "Do you want to play the bass?" "Yeah, why not?" So, we made a group right there. My compadre Medina was also my second voice, but since he wasn't there, Raul Garza the MC, he said, "Well, I'll do the second voice." At the time, we had only one mic to record everything.

*DNR: And, then you cut the track right there?*

GP: Yes, and all together. And, if you made a mistake you had to do it all over again. You couldn't overdub. So, it was Chuy Villegas playing the accordion because I was going to sing. It was a brand new song, you know. And, me and Raul sang. And, Alejandro played the bajo. And, compadre Cruz played the drums, and Pedro Bienavides played the electric bass. So, it's a mixed conjunto. But, we put it out as it was, not like I wanted to do it.

*DNR: How would you have done it if you were allowed?*

GP: Well, my compadre Medina playing the bajo sexto and singing the second voice with me, and I playing the accordion.

*DNR: Right, Johnny Phillips. He wanted to cut the track that day.*

GP: Yeah. And, he was right. The sooner he put it out, they took it to the radio and all the radio stations were playing it.

*DNR: And when was that? What month?*

GP: It was just right after Beulah.

*DNR: So, it was Agapito Zuniga who had his corrido out first.*

GP: Right.

*DNR: And then you thought why not a corrido about the crecientes [floods]?*

GP: That's how come they were pushing for that. Those corridos would get airplay, and then people would



forget because here comes another hurricane. Like everything else, you know, the new pushes out the old.

*DNR: With “Las Crecientes de Beulah” you chose do it in the corrido style instead of a canción [song], with a chorus and verse. Why use the corrido to tell about Beulah?*

GP: Right. Well, it was following the Onda, like you say, la Onda de corridos [the wave or style of corridos]. Because we figured there was going to be more corridos about Beulah. So, we played it in somewhat the style of the corrido to be in the same Onda.<sup>13</sup>

*DNR: Did you write most of the lyrics?*

GP: We all did. And, it wasn't too hard because of the news we heard on the radio, and it was suddenly as if it had just happened. When we got back from Arizona, it was flooded, that's when the levees broke here in Mercedes. So, I got to see all that. So, whatever happened we just placed it.

*DNR: When you got back to the Valley and Mercedes, what news stations or radio stations were you listening to about Beulah at the time?*

GP: We actually listened more to KGBT. ... you couldn't get it in Laredo. You could get it way down in Mexico, all the way to South America. ... The DJ there, they had block programs, you know, like Martín Gonzalez had a program, and Chuy De Leon, had another program also. Those old guys, you know. Francisco Gonzalez y Peña. The DJ that was there would do everything, the news, program the music. [Laughs] It was not like today, you know, where you have the weatherman, the newsman. ... Martín Gonzalez and Manny Lopez and those guys, they'd say the news in Spanish, and they would translate it into English. Or, they would get the newspaper, and it was written in English, but they were saying it in Spanish. They were translating it as they were reading. ... Like, I mentioned, me and my brother, even when we had a lot of water in this area, we used to drive checking the levees and all that. And we drove through La Feria and Harlingen to see what was happening, you know. ... sometimes the news missed something, or exaggerated something. So ... como se dicé Mexicanos – “ver ‘pa creer”. [So ... how do Mexicans say it – “to see is to believe.”] You got to see it to believe it, like St. Thomas. [Laughs]

*DNR: Did you perform “Las Crecientes de Beulah” when you went back out on the road for the campesinos [migrant farmworkers]?*

GP: At the beginning, yeah. For maybe six months or so they asked for it. Like in the area of Alice and Laredo, you know, because it [“Las Crecientes de Beulah”] mentioned that it went through Laredo. It starts about the hurricane, you know, about where it came and then the route from Brownsville up to Alice, and then it turned to Laredo. By the time it got to Laredo it was weak.

*DNR: Did you play for campesinos outside the state of Texas? Did they ask for “Las Crecientes de Beulah” in Arizona, California?*

GP: Yeah, because we were touring, you know.

*DNR: Right, you had to honor the contact with Mr. Calderón, and so you went back to Phoenix. Did you play “Las Crecientes de Beulah” when you went back to Phoenix?*

GP: Yes.

*DNR: And then in California, too?*

GP: Yes.

*DNR: What part of California did you go to on that tour?*

GP: In California, we performed Sangre, in the Sangre ballroom, and Fresno, and San Jose, Watsonville, Stockton, Madera ... uh let's see ... Bakersfield. And, I think that was it ... ah, and then San Fernando. Also Marysville. We played a lot of places.

*DNR: So, “Las Crecientes de Beulah” was like the news? The corrido let campesinos [migrant farmworkers] and other attendees at your gigs know what happened down in the Rio Grande Valley.*

GP: Right. I remember one thing. I'm not going to mention names, but I remember one thing that a few years later [during the anniversary of Hurricane Beulah's landfall] one DJ from a Mission station at KRT said. He called me and said, “Hey, do you have the Beulah record?” I say, “Yeah, I think I have it. “Well, go pick one, because of the date, September the 19<sup>th</sup>.” So, I gave him one, [Perez's 45 of “Las Crecientes de Beulah”] and he played it. Then, I went to a different station, a bigger station. I told the DJ there that the Mission station was playing “Las Crecientes de Beulah.” I said, “I got a record.” And this DJ said, “Nah, who wants to remember Beulah.” And, I didn't like the way he said it. But, he said, “Nah, Beulah's gone and forgotten.” “Who wants to hear something sad that had happened?” And, my answer was “Who wants to hear about Juan Charrasquiado? Or, Rosita Alvarez?<sup>14</sup> They were killed many years ago, and they still played those corridos.” So, I didn't like what he said. But, you know, I was promoting my group at the time, so I had to play along with the DJs. That's one thing I remember. I'm not going to mention names cause that man, he passed away.

*DNR: I'm going to ask some questions about the lyrics now. You sing about how Mexicanos on both sides of the Rio Grande faced hardship.*

GP: Right.

*DNR: ... and dealt with destruction. You write, “Que sufrieron ambos lados” [that both sides suffered].*

GP: Uh huh ... “ambos lados” [both sides].

*DNR: So, why did you feel, when you all were writing lyrics into two, three o'clock in the morning, the need to talk about Camargo and how the Mexicanos from the other side came over ...*

GP: To seek refuge.

*DNR: Yes, to seek refuge in Roma and Rio Grande City. Why it is important to talk not only how things were on this side, but also on the other side of the border?*

GP: We had to include that in the lyrics because it was in the news, and of course we knew what happened on the other side of the river. A lot of people there suffered a lot. That's how come a lot of people from Mexico came to Rio Grande City. In that little book I have it says in Roma and Rio Grande la gente se refugio [the people sought refuge]. And, it was news, and what I heard, and what came in the newspapers. Also, the main reason for including what happened on both sides was because of people not living in the Valley ... say from San Antonio, Houston ... we wanted the people to know what happened over here. We wanted the people up north to hear what had happened, about the crecientes [floods]. They heard more about the Hurricane than the aftermath.

*DNR: Right. Okay, I bring that up to because on the local news it's seems like they covered what happened en este lado [on this side] and en el otro lado, tambien, [and the other side, also] but the national news appears to not cover how Hurricane Beulah effected both sides of the border. Like in a Life Magazine article, they say Hurricane Beulah hit Texas, but that's it ... no talk about how it was a transborder event.*

GP: That's how come we did it, because we wanted to do it for the Spanish-speaking people, you know. I'm going to say this: In God's eyes, we're all brothers, regardless of the side of the River. That's how come we said, "In Brownsville and Matamoros." We said "En Tejas and Tamaulipas/ siempre se recordarán." It will always be remembered in Tamaulipas as in Texas, because the thing went through here, even though it was at the very, very tip of Texas in the Matamoros area, they suffered the same way we did here on this side.

*DNR: What's also so interesting about your song "Las Crecientes de Beulah" is you talk about how the communities worked together from both sides, like Roma allowing the citizens of Camargo to come across. Would you say – cause many corridos have a heroes – would you say the gente [people] of the community are the heroes of "Las Crecientes de Beulah"?*

GP: Well, in that question, I'm going to say there were a lot of heroes, like the fire departments, the police force, the highway patrol, any kind of force, you know, that would help in different ways. Like when we came back from Arizona, they had, in the area of Rio Grande City and Roma, farmers furnish tractors to pull people that were coming back to the Valley. So, they were some of the heroes and some of the heroes also saved a lot of people from being drowned. So, actually, I wouldn't know who to call a particular hero, but everybody joined in as an Army to help one another. And, most of the time when things like this happened that are pretty sad, people always get together in prayers and in helping one another. That's the way it mostly happens.

*DNR: You also write that the Governor of Texas, "junto con el Presidente," [together with the President] came to witness the destruction. So, here you're referring to President Johnson and Texas Governor Connally when they came to the Rio Grande Valley eight days after Beulah hit.<sup>15</sup> What are your reflections on their quick visit?*

GP: Well, for everybody here it was un consuelo [a comfort], you know, to name it a disaster area for getting help from the State and from the President. It helped for them to see what had really happened, and there was a lot of damage. It was in the millions, you know.

*DNR: So, the last question on the lyrics ... toward the end of “Las Crecientes de Beulah” you tell the listener “perdoname,” “forgive me” for not being able to mention many other cases that happened during the hurricane.*

GP: Yes.

*DNR: Can you explain why you ask for forgiveness?*

GP: Well, at the time it was 45 rpm records that we used to cut. And they were limited; you could only get so much time. The jukeboxes wouldn't play longer than so much time, you know. And, so we had to work in a way that got as much information as we could in say, less than three minutes. So, that's how come I ask. Like for example, we mention Harlingen, Rio Hondo, La Feria, Mercedes, Mission, McAllen, Reynosa and Matamoros. So, I say forgive me for not mentioning Rio Bravo or mentioning Weslaco, or Edinburg. They suffered the same way we did. But, we couldn't get it all. But, the reason is because ... qué dice [What does it say]... Dios es el que manda. [God is the one who commands it.]... it's ... what would you call it?

*DNR: God's will.*

GP: So, excuse me for singing this and missing the towns and the people. So, I mentioned whatever I could in this particular time that I have to record.

*DNR: To fit the 45?*

GP: You can make it longer now. In a CD you can play a song for five, six minutes or whatever.

*DNR: I guess the radio might not have liked an eight-minute corrido on Beulah, too?*

GP: Oh, no.

*DNR: It's more marketable to have the three-minute corrido.*

GP: Right. And, concerning jukeboxes ... there were a lot of jukeboxes at the time that would play only so much time, and it would stop playing even if the song wasn't through, yet. It would quit because of time. Also, they were there to make money. [Laughs]

*DNR: So it wasn't marketable or profitable to have the song run longer than four minutes?*

GP: Yes.

*DNR: Hurricane Beulah was such an important historic event, and as we've been talking about, it's also a really important topic for conjunto artists, producers and labels, like Falcon, and Ideal, and Chico. I looked up online and saw that “Las Crecientes de Beulah” has a copyright date of December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1968. So, when did it first come out? Did it come out first on the 45 and it went through the copyright later?*

GP: Yes. And, one thing ... it's not funny, we wrote the lyrics and somebody else copyright it. We put it out

and we didn't copyright it. So, somebody else did that part. It happens. Back in the 50s and 60s and lot of groups, conjuntos and a lot of types of music, would write original material and wouldn't copyright because they didn't know where to go. And the companies itself, there were some companies that had a name that wasn't real. They'd put that name just to not pay royalties... an invented name. Like they do nowadays, they use IDs from people that have died, you know. It always happened in a lot of ways not only in the music business. Like the song that was very popular, and it's still very popular that I recorded back in 1963, "Con Cartitas" it was also not copyright by the real composer.<sup>16</sup>

*DNR: We mentioned Agapito Zuniga. You listened to his corrido on Beulah and said, "Hey, he has a tragedia, but we need something about the aftermath of Beulah." Zuniga wrote "Tragedia de Beulah," and that came out under Bego. And then Tony de la Rosa covered it under FAMA. The Tony de la Rosa cover, I found on YouTube.<sup>17</sup> Tony de la Rosa went on to include the corrido in his exitos [hits]. And then there's also a corrido by José Morante called "Victimas del [Huracan] Beulah," which Flaco Jimenez performs. Did you ever listen to José Morante's "Victimas del [Huracan] Beulah"?*

GP: No. The name sounds familiar, pero [but] I can't remember his music.

*DNR: When I first got here I was showing you these two [Hurricane Beulah] albums that I have. This one here was put out by Ideal and performed by Gilberto Lopez y su Conjunto that has "Las Crecientes" covered ... see right there. [Rivera points to the song list on the 33 record album titled 26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah]. Then, this other 33 record is titled Beulah ... y las Crecientes.*

GP: Like here ... it's got the names of the composers.

*DNR: "Perez, Garza, Gonzalez". [Rivera reads the composer names listed under "Las Crecientes de Beulah" on 26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah.]*

GP: It was my compadre Raul and my compadre Cruz, and then Perez is for me and Alejandro.

*DNR: [Rivera points on the song list again.] There is Morante's "Victimas" that Gilberto Lopez also covered. And then there's the credit given to José Morante, and then there's Zuniga's, too. So, it's like a whole themed album about Beulah got recorded. And then, there's this one here by Oro that it looks like it got released later, I assume, because of the difference in color quality. [Rivera shows Perez Oro's concept record titled Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah.] So, the question that I have is why do you think record producers like [Arnulfo] Ramirez from Falcon and Betancourt from Ideal put out the Beulah concept albums? Basically, they would get other conjunto acts to perform your song.*

GP: I heard the Agapito Zuniga version, but a lot of these other versions ... There's one written by Enrique Maldonado, and I recorded a lot of songs for him, but I've never heard this particular version "Recuerdos de Beulah" ... and another one by Enrique Maldonado "Corrido de Beulah" ... José Morante, I knew him more as a composer than a musician, because I used to see his name under a lot of songs.

*DNR: It seems like Ramirez and Betancourt ... they thought that these concept albums on Hurricane Beulah would sell?*

GP: What happened was the record companies at the time ... somebody puts out something and it's competition, you know.

*DNR: Okay.*

GP: Actually, that's what it turns out to be. Like my daddy used to say, competition is good because it makes you move. It makes you keep going. But, only if it's clean. ... if competition is dirty, it's not right. [Laughs.] La competencia es Buena sea limpia. Porque te hace que te muevas. Pero sea la competencia es murgrosa, no sirve. So, it was telling us, teaching us to be competitive with somebody else, but be clean.

*DNR: Right.*

GP: Don't cheat; don't do something bad for competition because competition is going to keep you going.

*DNR: And it kept Ideal, Falcon, Oro, Bronco going on this topic of Hurricane Beulah. It was kind of like a snowball effect, one did it and the other record companies followed.*

GP: It's like if someone puts a filling station in one corner of the street and somebody else puts another one in front of it. They're not going to build it a mile away. They're going to put it right there because right there is the business. So, it's similar to what happened with record competition. Fijate que, [Imagine that] I didn't know that many corridos were written for Beulah.

*DNR: Yeah. Yours was covered, and Morante's was covered, and Agapito Zuniga's was covered. Yours, Morante's, and Zuniga's were the three main corridos that were put on all of these [Hurricane Beulah] concept albums.<sup>18</sup>*

GP: I see.

*DNR: Did you get any royalties?*

GP: No. It wasn't ... like I said it wasn't under our name.<sup>19</sup>

*DNR: So, Ramirez and Betancourt never asked you, "Hey, Gilberto can we use "Las Crecientes" for Gilberto Lopez?"*

GP: Well, actually you don't have to. The writer is supposed to copyright it. But, it happened so fast, you know, that by the time. ... It had happened in other recordings we made. We record. And then, a lot of these companies, they record a song, and then they wait until they get so many songs so they can send it to be published. During that time comes the sharks, you know. And, they find out it's not copyrighted.

*DNR: What year do you think Gilberto Lopez's [26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah] came out? Do think this is '68 or '69?*

GP: I wouldn't know cause I never heard it.

*DNR: I was looking on the album for a [copyright] year, and I can't find a year. Obviously, the album came out after you wrote "Las Crecientes de Beulah" because your corrido is on here.*

GP: Because in this area ... and we used to travel a lot ... all I heard was Agapito Zuniga's version, and then ours came. The pressers were pressing twenty-four hours to furnish the records. It was slow motion, you know, not quick like nowadays. But, they worked because everybody was asking for the records, not only in this particular area but all the way to California.

*DNR: Wherever there were campesinos or pockets of urban Mexicanos in the cities?*

GP: Uh huh. Andalé. [Right.]

*DNR: Why do you think it is important, Mr. Perez, that the people in the Rio Grande Valley, South Texas, Tamaulipas and elsewhere remember Hurricane Beulah and its aftermath, fifty years later and further into the future?*

GP: Well, actually what's important to me is what you're doing right now, writing about it so people that weren't born yet know what happened, know about history, know about the history here in the Rio Grande Valley and South Texas, actually. That's the most important thing to me.

DNR: Thank you. I respect you for documenting Beulah with a corrido.

GP: Right. Well, that's a reason that even at the time I considered letting people know what happened, and record it, so it will stay recorded, and the main thing was to do something different than what I had heard about the Hurricane.

DNR: Is there anything else you'd like to add about Hurricane Beulah that we didn't cover?

GP: Like I said, whatever I remember, whatever I think about Beulah, it's in the tragedia, the corrido. And of course, like I say in the last verse ... "Perdoname" si no mencioné" [Forgive me if I did not mention].

*(Endnotes)*

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2. The unedited transcription of both interviews is available at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) Border Studies Archive.

3. According to Perez, Chico existed from 1967-1968. After its dissolution, Perez established his self-owned Nuevo label, where he recorded his music and other conjuntos from the fall of 1968 to the 1980s. Paco Betancourt along with Armando Marroquín were pioneer conjunto/Tejano record producers during the post-World War II era. Betancourt partnered with Marroquín to run Ideal records from 1950-1959. After their business partnership ended, Betancourt partnered with John Phillips to run the Rio Grande Music Company in San Benito, Texas, where they continued the Ideal record label. For more on Betancourt see *Handbook of Texas Online*, Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Betancourt, Paco," <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbeca> (accessed July 29, 2017).

4. . The Nueces River flooded its banks as well, and Hurricane Beulah also ignited dozens of tornados between the area of Corpus Christi and Houston.

5. *Brownsville Herald*, "Mexico Breaches Levees To Ease River Rise Here," September 26, 1967. *San Antonio Express*, "55,000 Said Getting Aid" and "Cadets Aid Flood Victims," September 29, 1967.

6. More recent scholarship on disaster corridos includes a student-oriented website "Corridos de Desastres" by the late James Nicolopoulos and a blog "Disaster Songs: Telling Tragedy in Any Language" by Agustín Gurza. Gurza's blog is part of UCLA's Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings, an extensive online archival database, which I used to help assemble the Hurricane Beulah discography of 45s and 33s in addition to my personal collection.

7. Read the included discography for a list of Hurricane Beulah vinyl records and the composers, performers, and record companies who produced Hurricane Beulah corridos in the late-1960s.

8. Mechanical royalties, defined by BMI, refer to the "per-unit payments made by the record company to the music publisher for the reproduction of copyrighted musical compositions appearing on CDs, cassettes, vinyl albums, and other manufactured formats. Basically, each time a consumer purchases a song recording, publishers receive a mechanical royal payment, which is then passed on to the songwriter." The term dates back to 1909 Copyright Law. See Kevin Zimmerman, "Understanding Mechanical Royalties," BMI, [http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/Understanding\\_Mechanical\\_Royalties](http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/Understanding_Mechanical_Royalties) (accessed July 25, 2017).

9. There were an estimated forty-one deaths associated with Hurricane Beulah, which at its peak was a Category Five hurricane before making landfall as a Category Three near the mouth of the Rio Grande. Thirteen deaths were counted in the Caribbean Island of Martinique, two deaths in St. Vincent, one in Puerto Rico, and two lives were lost in Dominican Republic. Eleven people were killed in the northern Yucatan, and one life was lost in northern Mexico. Ten people died in Texas. No lives were lost in the Lower Rio



Grande Valley in relation to Hurricane Beulah. (See Hurricane Beulah: Preliminary Report N.O.A.A.)

10. Delgado is a Spanish surname that means thin or slim.

11. The Llano Grande is a small community and golf course by the floodway in Mercedes, Texas.

12. Another synonym in the south Texas Spanish dialect to refer to hurricane.

13. See *Valley Morning Star*. 1968. "Sept. 19, 1967, A Day No Valleyite is Likely To Forget" by Bill Mayes. September 19.

14. Onda is a popular slang word in Spanish-speaking cultures that literally translates into "wave." In the context Mr. Perez uses it, "onda" figuratively expresses the style, or way of doing something.

15. Perez refers to two famous earlier twentieth century folk corridos "El Corrido de Rosita Alvarez" and "El Corrido de Juan Charrasqueado" that made the transition into late-twentieth century commercialization and radio airplay.

16. President Lyndon B. Johnson landed in Harlingen, Texas at 5 p.m. on September 28, 1967. He toured parts of Harlingen along with Texas Governor John B. Connally, Senator Ralph Yarborough, Senator John Tower and several State Representatives that included Kika de la Garza of the Rio Grande Valley. After surveying the heavily flooded border areas of Hidalgo and Starr counties by helicopter and visiting a refugee shelter in Rio Grande City, he declared the Rio Grande Valley counties and twenty other South Texas counties "a disaster area" making available federal aid to distressed counties. See *Brownsville Herald*, "President Okays Disaster Funds for Storm-Stricken South Texas," September 29, 1967.

17. "Con Cartitas" ["With Little Letters"] was very popular a love song/Ranchera recorded dozens of times over by numerous Spanish-language recording artists. Perez, here, refers to his cover recorded by Falcon (45 rpm, Catalog Number 1345).

18. See "Tragedia del huracán Beulah," YouTube Video, 3:50, Tony de la Rosa's performance recorded on *15 Exitos Una Leyenda Texana*, posted by "Catapult Reservatory, LLC," November 20, 2015, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YraYM\\_jLZWU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YraYM_jLZWU).

19. Gilberto Perez's "Las Crecientes de Beulah" was republished a total of three times in the late-1960s. It was covered on a 45 rpm by Freddie Gómez y Sus Dinámicos under Falcon and included on two 33 rpm Hurricane Beulah concept albums, *Beulah ... Y Las Crecientes* put out by Bronco (a division of Falcon) and *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah* released by Ideal and covered by Gilberto Lopez y Su Conjunto. A total of three 33 rpm Beulah concept albums were released: *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, *Beulah ... Y Las Crecientes*, and *Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah*, this last album by Oro.

20. At the time of my initial interview with Gilberto Perez, on June 27, 2017, Perez believed he did not own the copyright to "Las Crecientes de Beulah." At the follow-up interview, on July 24, 2017, I showed him a photocopy from the Catalog of Copyright Entries, Music, July-December 1968 from the Library of Congress that documents "Las Crecientes de Beulah" is copyrighted to "Gilberto Perez." After a moment of surprised speechlessness, Perez replied he believes Paco Betancourt sent "Las Crecientes de Beulah" to the Copyright Office, when I asked who could have sent the corrido. With the passage of half a century, Perez was not embittered by this documentation or the fact that his song was covered multiple times without payment of royalties, as he maintains. In the follow-up interview, asserting his conjunto profited in other ways from "Las Crecientes de Beulah," Perez states, "We got publicity, and it ["Las Crecientes de Beulah"] kept us going. It kept us working."

*“Las Crecientes de Beulah”*  
by Perez, Garza, Gonzalez

Año de sesenta-siete  
Diecinueve de Septiembre  
Fecha muy inolvidable  
Recordará mucha gente

Los ventarrones de Beulah  
En la historia quedarán  
Por Tejas y Tamaulipas  
Siempre se recordarán

En Brownsville y Matamoros  
Donde primero azotó  
Se dividió par el norte  
Por al Alice, Tejas paso

Con rumbo a los dos Laredos  
Fue la ruta que tomó  
Pero afortunadamente  
Su fuerzas se le acabó

Despues que Beulah pasó  
Siguió sufriendo la gente  
De tanta agua que dejó  
Se formaron las crecientes

Ciudad Miguel Alemán  
De las primeras que hundió  
En Roma y en Rio Grande  
La gente se refugió

En San Miguel de Camargo  
Se desbordo el Rio Bravo  
Fue una creciente muy grande  
Que sufrieron ambos lados

Mission, Reynosa, y McAllen  
No se me puede olvidar  
Seguía subiendo el agua  
Sin poderla controlar

Por los bordos del desague  
Mucha gente trabajaba  
Para salvar a Mercedes  
Que bastante peligrosaba

Siguió luchando la gente  
Pero el agua había aumentado  
A reventar la compuerta  
Al Arroyo Colorado

De La Feria hasta Rio Hondo  
Harlingen fue más dañado  
Por el agua que salía  
Del Arroyo Colorado

El gobernador de Tejas  
Junto con el Presidente  
Vinieron a presenciar  
Los daños de esta creciente

Una tragedia come esta  
Da esta tristeza cantar  
Perdoname muchos casos  
Que no alcance a mencionar

Pero todos los sentimos  
A Dios pedimos clemencia  
Pero estas cosas las manda  
La divina providencia

*“Las Crecientes de Beulah”*  
*by Perez, Garza, Gonzalez*

In the year of sixty-seven  
Nineteenth of September  
A very unforgettable date  
Many people will remember

The gale-forced winds of Beulah  
In history will remain  
For Texas and Tamaulipas  
Will always remember

In Brownsville and Matamoros  
Where first it hit  
It split to the north  
By Alice, Texas it passed

In the direction of the two Laredos  
Was the route that it took  
But, fortunately  
Its strength diminished

After Beulah passed  
The people continued suffering  
From all the water left behind  
That formed the floods

Cuidad Miguel Alemán  
One of the first that submerged  
In Roma and Rio Grande City  
People took refuge

In San Miguel de Camargo  
The Rio Bravo overflowed its banks  
There was a flooding so great  
That both sides suffered

Mission, Reynosa, and McAllen  
I cannot forget  
The water kept rising  
Without the power to be controlled

By the edge of the levees  
Lots of people worked  
To save Mercedes  
That was in much danger

The people continued to fight  
But the water had increased  
To burst the gate  
Of the Arroyo Colorado

From La Feria to Rio Hondo  
Harlingen was most damaged  
By the water that came out  
Of the Arroyo Colorado

The governor of Texas  
Together with the President  
Came to witness  
The damages of this flood

A tragedy like this  
Gives sadness to sing  
Forgive me for many cases  
That I was unable to mention

But, we feel for All  
We ask God for mercy  
But, these things are sent  
By Divine Providence

## ***Discography of Hurricane Beulah Corridos***

### **Listings by Composer**

- López, Willie and Lupe Cantú. "Visperas De Beulah," *Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah*, ORO, 33 rpm, LP 201.
- López, Willie and Ramón Cantú. "Estragos Del Huracan," *Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah*, ORO, 33 rpm, LP 201.
- López, Willie and Ramiro Cavazos. "Desastre Oficial," *Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah*, ORO, 33 rpm, LP 201.
- Los Hermanos Cantú. "Llegada de Beulah," *Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah*, ORO, 33 rpm, LP 201.
- Maldonado, Enrique L. "Recorrido De Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Lopez Y Su Conjunto, *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, IDEAL, 33 rpm, ILP-162.
- . "Corrido De Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Lopez Y Su Conjunto, *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, IDEAL, 33 rpm, ILP-162.
- . "Recuerdos De Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Lopez Y Su Conjunto, *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, IDEAL, 33 rpm, ILP-162.
- Morante, José A. "Victimas de Huracan Beulah," Performed by Flaco Jiménez Y Su Conjunto with back-up vocals by Morante and Toby Torres, NORTENO, 45 rpm, SO-2294-A.
- . "Victimas de Huracan Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Perez Y Su Conjunto, *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, IDEAL, 33 rpm, ILP-162.
- . "Victimas de Huracan Beulah," Performed by Gavilanes De Mario Saenz Y Wally Gonzalez, *Beulah Y Las Crecientes*, BRONCO, 33 rpm, BRLP-042. Perez, Gilberto, Alejandro Perez, Raul Garza and Cruz Gonzalez. "Las Crecientes de Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Perez y Sus Compadres, CHICO, 45 rpm, CH-118.
- . "Las Crecientes de Beulah," Performed by Freddie Gomez Y Sus Dinámicos, FALCON, 45 rpm, 1703, 17.

- . "Las Crecientes de Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Lopez y Su Conjunto, *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, IDEAL, 33 rpm, ILP-162.
- . "Las Crecientes de Beulah," Performed by Freddie Gomez, Beulah  
... Y Las Crecientes, BRONCO, 33 rpm, BRLP-042.
- Ramírez, A. and Ramiro Cavazos. "Un Corrido Mas a Beulah," Performed by Los Favoritos De Terán, ORO, 45 rpm, 237-A.
- . "Un Corrido Mas a Beulah," *Corridos y Canciones de: Beulah*, ORO, 33 rpm, LP 201.  
Zuniga, Agapito. "Tragedia Del Huracan Beulah," Performed by Agapito Zuniga y Su Conjunto, BEGO, 45 rpm, BG-412+.
- . "Tragedia Del Huracan Beulah," Performed by Los Hermanos De La Rosa, FAMA, 45 rpm, 176-A.
- . "Tragedia Del Huracan Beulah," Performed by Freddie Gomez Y Sus Dinámicos, FALCON, 45 rpm, 1703.
- . "Tragedia De Beulah," Performed by Gilberto Lopez Y Su Conjunto, *26° Norte 97.3° Oeste Huracan Beulah*, IDEAL, 33 rpm, ILP-162.

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