

View from Somewhere Episode 7: The Life and Death of Ruben Salazar

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Ruben Salazar episode CREDITS:

Producer and creator: Ramona Martinez

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Theme music: [Dogbotic](#)

Additional music: [Podington Bear](#)

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Special thanks: WUNC for recording help, BackStory radio for allowing us to replay this piece

Voice actor: James Scales as Hunter S. Thompson

Ruben Salazar (ep 7) LINKS:

[Behind the Bylines: Advocacy Journalism in America on BackStory](#)

[Border Correspondent: Selected Writings, 1955-1970](#), by Ruben Salazar

[The Ruben Salazar Project](#), biography & timeline with primary sources at USC Annenberg

[National Association of Hispanic Journalists Ruben Salazar Fund](#)

[Death of Ruben Salazar](#), painting by Frank Romero

[“Journalist’s Death Still Clouded by Questions : Friends say Ruben Salazar, whose stories often criticized police treatment of Mexican Americans, believed he was in danger. His 1970 slaying left a lasting wound”](#) by Robert Lopez for the L.A. Times, 1995

[View from Somewhere DONATION PAGE—help us get to the end of our season!](#)

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#), by Lewis Raven Wallace (University of Chicago Press, 2019)

MUSIC CREDITS (in order of appearance):

- **Back Stairs** by Podington Bear
- **LA** by Podington Bear
- **For Beth** by Podington Bear
- **Dolce Beat** by Podington Bear
- **Crow** by Podington Bear
- **Definition** by Ketsa.

TRANSCRIPT

Ramona Martinez:

This is the View from Somewhere, a podcast about journalism with a purpose—I'm Ramona Martinez, the producer. This podcast is serialized, so if like what you hear, go back and listen from the start. You can find full transcripts of these episodes at viewfromsomewhere.com. And just so y'all know, this episode does contain a graphic description of police violence, about a minute from now. Thanks for listening, and enjoy the show.

THEME MUSIC

Lewis: Hey Ramona!

Ramona: Hey hey...

Lewis: Hi cute listeners. Happy New Year and I wanted to say a quick thank you to the people who have gone online and donated to help us get to the end of the season. We've raised more than a thousand dollars that way, thanks to you folks who made the leap! There are signed copies of my book available, and these gorgeous posters of Ida B. Wells and Marvel Cooke and Ruben Salazar. So just go to View from somewhere dot com, click on the donate button, feel fuckin good about yourself allll day. And seriously, thanks to those who've supported us already. You're awesome.

Ramona: Thank you so much.

Lewis: Okay, so...on the last episode of the View from Somewhere, we talked about seeking truth in the Vietnam era. Today, Ramona and I want to share the story of someone else who reported in Vietnam, and someone whose legacy is important to the history of objectivity. And to us personally.

Ramona: We are talking about Ruben Salazar, who was one of the first latino journalists to have a byline in an anglo newspaper, the L.A. Times. He was well known in LA because he also ran the city's first spanish language news station, KMEX.

And in August of 1970, he went to cover a HUGE demonstration on the East Side held by Mexican Americans to protest how many people in their community were being killed in Vietnam. Like 30,000 people cam to this protest

[ambient protest speech sound]

Ramona: Even though there were families and children at the rally, there was an incident near the park that caused police to sweep in and clash with the protesters.

MUSIC

[ambi from dub]

Ramona: Ruben Salazar and his camera crew ducked into a nearby bar to get away from the clashes, but while he was in there, an LAPD deputy aimed a tear gas projectile into the bar and it struck Salazar on the head and killed him instantly.

Lewis: This story is so awful. A lot of people think it was an assassination, right?

Ramona: People have always suspected that police killed him on purpose, but it's never been definitively proven. What we can certainly say is that he became more famous in life than in death, and it's actually his life and career that I want to focus on today...

Lewis: And lucky for us, Ramona used to be a producer at BackStory, and she did the piece we're about to play for an episode there called *Behind the Bylines*....so grateful that this exists. Take it away Ramona!

Typewriter bumper

[TRANSCRIPT FROM ORIGINAL BACKSTORY PIECE]

Ramona Martinez: In 1968, Ruben Salazar got a letter from the LA Times. He was in Mexico City serving as the newspaper's bureau chief. Salazar was an old school Cronkite era reporter, he had been with the LA Times for nine years, including a stint covering the Vietnam War. In Mexico, he had been enjoying his promotion to bureau chief, but his editors were calling him back to LA. They needed him on his old beat, the Mexican American beat.

Philip. R: Because the Times really didn't have anyone else.

Ramona Martinez: This is filmmaker Philip Rodriguez.

Philip. R: Well, there are a lot of reasons for it. But ultimately, some of his editors believed that Ruben would do a better job of reporting this phenomenon than other people might.

Ramona Martinez: This phenomenon he refers to is what's now known as the Chicano movement. It was a decade's long civil rights struggle for Mexican Americans. In 1968, it had exploded on the streets of LA.

Speaker 14: We have the lowest reading rate, in East LA in the east side schools.

Ramona Martinez: News reports covered the activism. In one case, 15,000 students from some of LA's poorest neighborhoods staged a walkout.

Speaker 14: We have graduates who graduate from high school, the graduate have to face the world and can only read eighth and the ninth grade reading level. We believe this is a crisis.

Ramona Martinez: This was the politically charged atmosphere Ruben Salazar encountered when he returned to LA in 1969. Felix Gutierrez is a journalism professor at the University of Southern California, he was a student activists back then.

Felix Gutierrez: This was a period of activism, of picketing, of protesting, marches, demands, confrontations, some of them violent between establishment authorities, whether it's law enforcement, schools, health officials or whatever. As a community developed its own identity and its own name for it for what it was, which is the Chicano Movement.

Ramona Martinez: Salazar wasn't thrilled about his new assignment. Philip Rodriguez says that although Salazar believed Mexican Americans were underserved, he didn't really identify with the young Chicano activists.

Philip. R: He was a silent generation era American, a Korean War veteran, hard worker, and a very much an assimilationist. He married a white lady, a gringo and lived in Orange County.

Ramona Martinez: Rodriguez says that at first, Salazar was skeptical of the Chicano movement's militant tactics. Its leaders included groups like The Brown Berets, modeled on the Black Panthers.

Philip. R: When he first started hearing their rhetoric, and witnessing their brash insistent style, I think Salazar was taken aback and a little mistrustful of what was going on. Ramona Martinez: But Salazar covered the Chicano movement seriously. He wrote about plans for strikes, interviewed The Brown Berets, and spent time in the barrios. He reported on the indictment of movement organizers like Sal Castro, who faced 66 years in prison for helping students plan the East LA walkouts. He also wrote about bilingual public schools on the US Mexico border.

But by 1970, after just one year reporting on the Chicano movement, Salazar started to get restless. Salazar's next move might have seemed strange for an Orange County Cronkite era reporter. He became news director of a Spanish language Television station in Los Angeles called KMEX. But he didn't sever his ties to the LA Times, he also wrote a weekly opinion

column for the paper. Felix Guitierrez says in those columns, Salazar began to speak more openly about his perspective as a Mexican American. This took some of his former news colleagues by surprise.

Felix Gutierrez: Here's who I am. Here's the way I see things. Here's a way that people look at things. Their story was that he was good old Rube at the LA Times. But before he left, then they start seeing his columns and they realize he's not one of the boys. He has had different experiences and he sees things differently than we do.

TV Announcer: The Siesta is over. A series designed to further understanding between the Anglo, and Mexican American communities

Ramona Martinez: Here is Ruben Salazar and in a 1970 interview with a local television station. Salazar's talking to journalists Bob Navarro, Navarro speaks first.

Bob Navarro: Well, here you were at the Los Angeles Times, large metropolitan daily a newspaper with an international reputation, riding the crest of a career. All of a sudden you leave the Times, you go to channel 34 ... and like I said before, a Spanish speaking station. Why?

Ruben Salazar: I felt like I made a full circle at the Times, and I was very happy there. But the most important thing about my move to me was that I was frustrated. I wanted to really communicate with the people about whom I had been writing for for so long, with the Mexican American community directly and in their language. Because you see...

Ramona Martinez: As News Director of KMEX, Salazar continued covering the Chicano protest movement. He also began investigating the Los Angeles Police Department, and the LA County Sheriff's Office, and documenting police violence. Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson wrote that Salazar's relations with the police were growing increasingly hostile.

Hunter S. Thompson (Voice Actor): When Salazar good onto a routine story about some worthless kid named Ramirez getting beaten to death in a jail fight, he was likely to come up with almost anything, including a series of hard hitting news commentaries strongly suggesting that the victim have been beaten to death by the jailers. In the Summer of 1970, Ruben Salazar was warned three times by the cops to tone down his covering and each time he told them to f*** off.

Ramona Martinez: Salazar was beginning to rethink his role as a journalist. Here's Bob Navarro again, asking him about it.

Bob Navarro: I may be making a judgment that's unfair, but it seems to me that you're leaving a position as a reporter who should be "Objective" and venturing into an area of advocacy. Why?

Ruben Salazar: Right, you're absolutely right. I think all this talk about objectivity in the press is so unrealistic. I remember a great quote from ... I forget what poet it was, but he said that man is an emotional animal, not a rational one. I believe that strongly, and so consequently of man is an emotional animal and not a rational one. Objectivity is impossible, and I don't think there's a newsman alive who really thinks that objectivity is the name of the game in the news media.

Bob Navarro: But is advocacy the name of the game? Can you work as a functional day to day reporter, in a position of advocacy?

Ruben Salazar: I'm only advocating the Mexican American community, just like the general media is advocating really our economy, our country, our way of life. So I'm just advocating a community within the community which by the way, the general community has totally ignored. So someone must advocate that.

Ramona Martinez: Historian Mario Garcia thinks this advocacy came at a price.

Mario Garcia: Salazar had the feeling that he was being spied upon, that he was being investigated, that at one point he felt that things from his desk in his office had been gone through, and so forth. He felt that there was an effort by the police to strike back at him.

Ramona Martinez: The day before the protest where he was killed, his boss said, "I'll see you on Monday." Salazar replied, "Yeah, if I survive, you'll see me." The next time his boss saw him, he was identifying Salazar his body. He was 42 when he died.

Felix Gutierrez says that no charges were brought against the police deputy who fired the tear gas canister that struck Salazar. It appears to have been an accident, according to reporters who have examined redacted files. But many Chicanos including Gutierrez weren't so sure.

Felix Gutierrez: It just didn't ring true that this was just happenstance, or circumstance of errors that had made this happen. He was raised to iconic status by our people because he had been our voice.

Ramona Martinez: Overnight, Salazar became a martyr for the Chicano movement. Hundreds of Mexican Americans came to pay their respects while his body laid in state in East LA. But Philip Rodriguez says Salazar's martyrdom is misplaced. He'd been reporting on the Chicano movement and thought it was an important story, but he wasn't an activist.

Philip. R: They appropriated Ruben, and his memory. Ruben who really wasn't a member of their movement, Ruben who really was a bystander, an onlooker, a chronicler. And it was a strange fit. Even his widow one day said, "I don't recognize the man that they've made out of my husband to be, he wouldn't have recognize himself."

Ramona Martinez: Mario Garcia says that Ruben Salazar valued his identity as a mainstream journalist.

Mario Garcia: Because he ... I think so much of him still wanted to be respected as a professional journalist, he didn't want again to be stereotyped as a Mexican journalist, he certainly would not want to be stereotyped as a Chicano activists, or a Chicano movement journalists. So it was part of his inner struggles I think.

Ramona Martinez: Filmmaker Philip Rodriguez thinks Salazar was killed before he could resolve that tension.

Philip. R: What makes Ruben Salazar interesting is that in a certain way, he was neither fish nor fowl, that he was trying to both understand and responsibly report on a very rapidly changing environment.

*****end of Behind the Bylines piece*****

Ramona: That piece was from Behind the Bylines: Advocacy in America, a BackStory episode from 2017. You can hear more episodes of BackStory at backstoryradio.org. Special thanks to voice actor James Scales who played Hunter S. Thompson.

THEME MUSIC OUTRO

Lewis: Next time on the View from Somewhere.

Sarah Schulman: I remember we faxed a mile of black paper to the New York Times when they got their first fax machine or they were act up made a facsimile of the New York Times called New York Crimes and put it in their newspaper boxes and because the, the reporting was just terrible.

Lewis: Covering AIDS in the 1980s, and how being *close* to the story can sometimes make us better reporters.

Stay tuned in, subscribe, tell your friends about us, and leave us a review on iTunes! It really helps. Also, don't forget to go to our website, viewfromsomewhere.com, to make a donation. You'll be a part of this independent effort to change journalism, plus you can get amazing posters of Ida B. Wells or Marvel Cooke or Ruben Salazar by Billy Dee, who also designed our logo. And get a signed copy of my book, *The View from Somewhere*. I'm Lewis Raven Wallace....

Ramona: And I'm Ramona Martinez. Our theme music is by Dogbotic, additional music by Podington Bear. Our distributor is Critical Frequency. And, uh, talk to you next time!