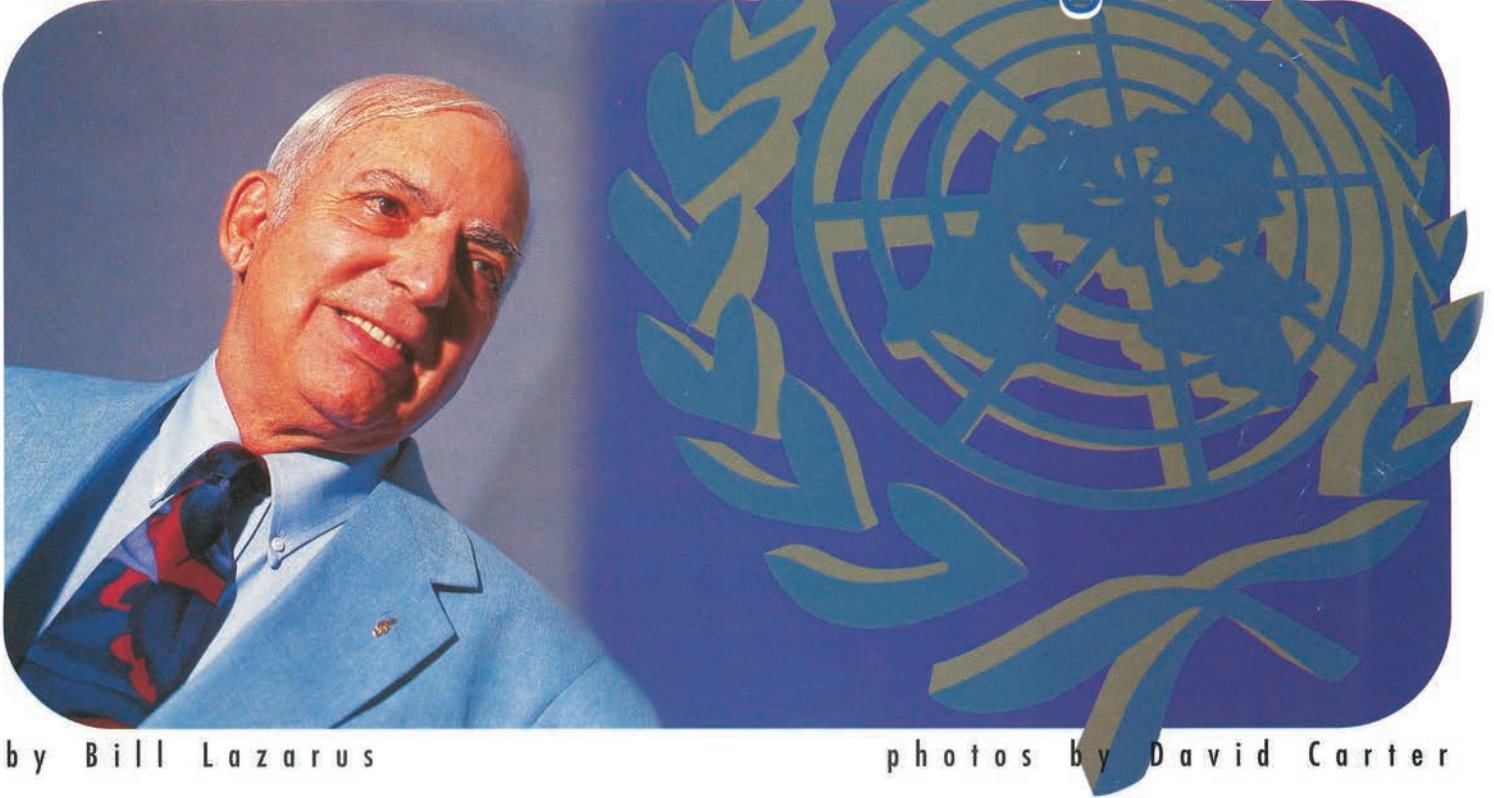


United Nations Songwriter



by Bill Lazarus

photos by David Carter

Ralph Betancourt can't sing a love song. He could open his mouth, and words about love could come out, of course, but it wouldn't really be a love song. Not with his voice. A cross between Louis Armstrong and the first sound of two trains colliding, his voice has been rasped by a 50-year smoking habit. The New York native stopped smoking a few years ago; the sandblasting affect obviously didn't vanish at the same time.

Instead of a love song, he needs a lusty song, something befitting his bluesy voice, an almost martial song with a base of hard stone, as exuberant as he is. No one seems to produce anything like that these days, so Betancourt wrote one himself. It's about the United Nations, as unlikely a topic as anyone could imagine, almost as unlikely as his voice actually producing a lullaby.

Calling himself the "singing mayor" of Daytona Beach Shores when he ran for office in 1997, Betancourt has sung that song so much that he's actually lived up to his nickname. He's sung "We Salute the United Nations" — a title as subtle as the author himself — to high school students around Volusia County on the annual United Nations Day. He's sung it in pub-

lic gatherings and in small classrooms.

Now, he's aiming at a national audience. Midway through this month, Betancourt will head to New York for the national convention of the UNA-USA, which represents state organizations devoted to the United Nations. The Florida convention last year voted unanimously to support Betancourt's hard-driving ditty as the official song of the United Nations. The group meeting in New York is expected to do the same thing.

The band at Spruce Creek High School in nearby Port Orange is supposed to record a music-only version of "We Salute" before Betancourt heads for his home state. If the work isn't ready, Betancourt plans to bring along a recording of his song produced by three local professional singers, and join in himself in a kind of four-part harmony.

"I know they'll like it," he says. Betancourt is sitting in a restaurant, explaining his course of action. At his request, he's been placed far away from everyone else so his conversation will not disturb others. It is a nice try, but his booming voice is audible even on the other side of the large room.

He can't help himself. Music gets him revved up. "Of course, I get excited. It's my song, my baby," he explains.

All of his enthusiasm has been stored up for four years. Being mayor has interfered with his creative output, which includes poetry. "I have to give my writing complete concentration," Betancourt says. "I couldn't do that with city business." As a result, he hasn't written another song in four years. One may be enough for immortality.

Betancourt, 76, grew up with music, singing in a church choir, playing drums and cymbals in a drum and bugle corps. In the Army Air Corps as a signal corpsman, he learned how to play the guitar and mandolin while stationed in London. That was not a career move. Even then, love songs probably didn't seem to offer much of a future.

After completing his service, he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Madrid on a multi-foreign language kit he developed and returned to the Empire State to begin a career as an educator. In the 1970s, closing a career that included working in classrooms and serving as a consultant to other teachers, he and his wife, Carol, retired to Florida. They picked a spot they had often passed through during their travels on vacations from New York to Miami and back.

Daytona Beach Shores never has been particularly large. Just 1.1 square miles long and very narrow at its widest point, it runs Chile-like along the barrier island that separates the Atlantic Ocean from the mainland. There was still no focus on music in Betancourt's life.



In 1997, fed up with what he saw was the "undemocratic" manner that the city was being run, he stood for office and upset a once-popular incumbent. The "singing mayor" had found an audience.

Instead, he amused himself by selling the opportunity for tourists to have a picture taken with a replica of a shark. "I was the only official photographer allowed on the beach in Daytona Beach Shores," he says.

Every now and then, he would write songs. To date, he has penned about 300 of them, copyrighted about 50 and made little money with any of them. He even has an album, and when no one else seemed overly enamored with his gravelly voice, turned into a music publisher.

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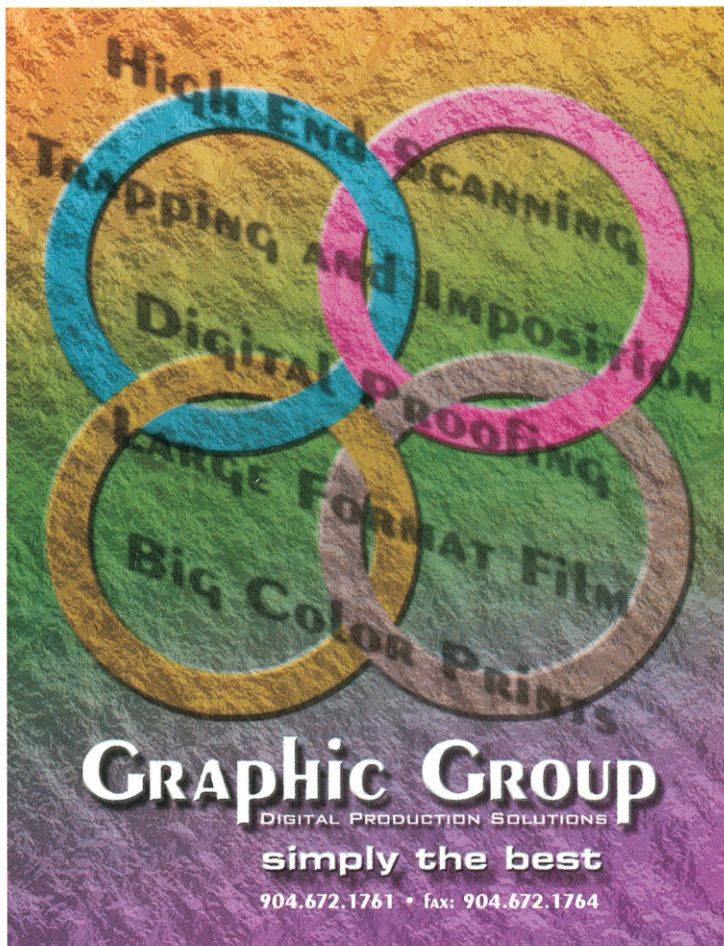
He suggested that the city sponsor a regular entertainment show in its community center. He was willing to be the first performer, of course. A new city manager was given an original song as a personal gift to the city. Uninvited, Betancourt showed up at a birthday party for a staff member with his guitar in hand and simply began playing. He got up at the annual Christmas party and, as guests hurried out, began singing along with the karaoke.

"Some audiences respond better than others," he says diplomatically, referring to students who just recently did not give him a standing ovation, but rather commenting on his limited entertainment career. "It depends on how my vocal chords are that day," he continues. "Sometimes, I sound pretty good."

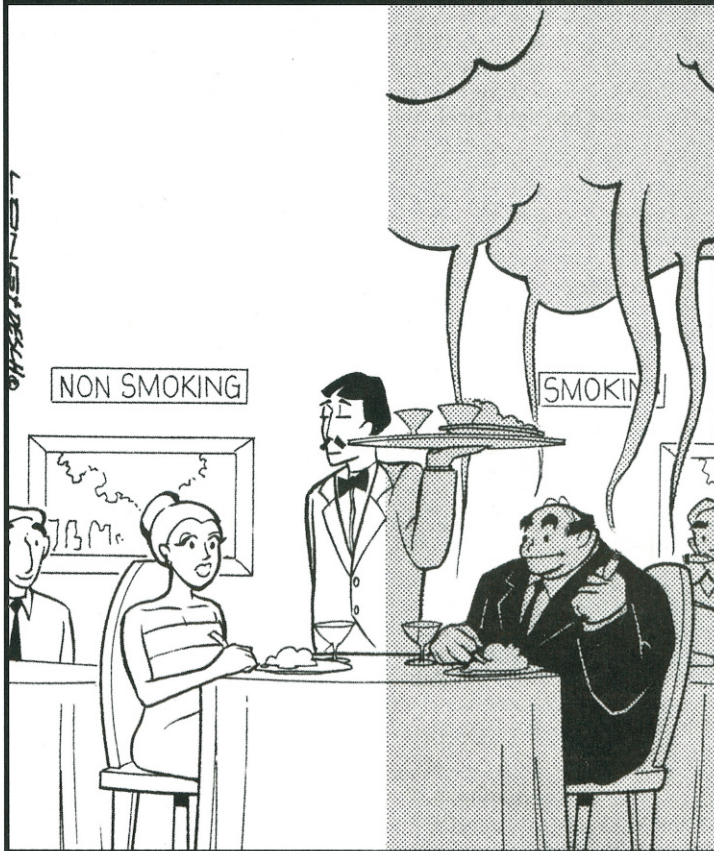
His wife, he admits, said that sometimes he doesn't.

It's hard to get upset with

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Uncorrected Visions by Neal Desch & Justin Long



How smokers perceive a restaurant

Betancourt. He's everyone's grandfather, with thin white hair carefully combed across a baldpate. A stocky man with a perpetual five-o'clock shadow – sort of Richard Nixonish with a smile and a bemused look – he is nonthreatening with an ever-present hint of both laughter and complete puzzlement in his hazel eyes. His sound is ham-handed, but there's lightness in his manner, especially in his walk, which is animated, as though he were still hurrying across the sand with his shark replica towards another bemused tourist.

His big singing chance came in 1998 when the city raised

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new flags in its court of flags. Built by the previous administration, the display features 11 flags from various countries and Old Glory. All the flags flown had represented countries before. Betancourt decided to include the flag of the United Nations.

That caused a stir. Daytona Beach Shores is a retirement community, filled with older people who, like Betancourt, live in beachside condos. Most are quiet. A few are demonstratively conservative, convinced the United Nations is trying to take over the world in some sort of mad conspiracy. One of the proponents of that idea was elected to city council with Betancourt in 1997.

The mayor saw an opportunity to sing his song. Councilwoman Millie Armstrong and her husband, Jim, saw the appearance of the United Nations flag as a sign of subservience.

One of Betancourt's charms is that he remains surprisingly innocent. He had no idea anyone would object to the UN or to the appearance of its powder-blue flag in the city park. He just wanted to sing a song he wrote.

He isn't even excited about the United Nations per se, although he supports the institution. While in grade school, he remembers hearing about the League of Nations, which sounded like a good idea at the time but was undermined

We Salute the United Nations

We salute the United Nations. It's for countries large and small.

We salute the United Nations. It works for the good of all.

Each nation has a place for meeting face to face
To share its point of view for the world to review.

We salute the United Nations
Shoulder to shoulder we stand.
Hand in hand for the good of man
We stand for peace for all mankind.

We salute the United Nations. It helps us to live in peace.
We salute the United Nations. It works so that war will cease.

It only uses force when there's no other course
And always keeps in mind a peace for all mankind.

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eventually. "It seemed like a way of avoiding war," Betancourt explains.

World War II came anyway.

He also was happy when the United Nations was created in the late 1940s. "The United Nations is needed," Betancourt says. "Look at all the good things it does."

He didn't write the song for that reason either. The idea had fermented for six or seven years after he realized the United Nations didn't have an official theme song. Clearly, this was a void to be filled, an opportunity no fledgling songwriter could overlook.

To be sure, there are songs that mention the United Nations or deal with familiar themes. An album produced by the United Nations Singers, a group of staff people, includes tunes from many countries, as well as the familiar "Let There Be Peace on Earth." Not a note, Betancourt points out energetically, tells anyone what the United Nations does.

Betancourt came up with a song to cover that glaring omission. He worked briefly with Bob Speegle, an Ormond Beach resident who has written commercials and has an excellent reputation in the music world. Betancourt wanted "a clear lyric that would flow. Something very simple." It would be a lyric that Irving Berlin, Betancourt's idol, might

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have conjured up.

Betancourt is enamored with Berlin, who wrote many of the most beloved songs of the 20th century. In fitting homage, Betancourt plays only the black keys on the piano in imitation of Berlin's limited ability on that instrument.

Eventually, Speegle opted out of the process – although he's now helping get the music set for final production – and Betancourt had to write the song himself.

He then assigned himself the task of singing it at the flag-raising ceremony.

"I don't know if anything would have happened with the song if I hadn't been mayor," Betancourt admits.

In the audience that spring day was Robert Ryan, who had retired to Volusia County after a career in the United Nations. Ryan liked the song – which Betancourt sang with the three other singers on tape – and encouraged him to see about getting the United Nations to adopt it.

That was music to any songwriter's ears. Betancourt would never get much money from the UN, regardless of whether or not the song is accepted, but if it became the theme song, every time it was used in movies or on television, he would receive a royalty check.

Even then, the results could be a pittance. "Such a song may not generate the royalties of a hit country song," Betancourt concedes, "but has a greater value as a part of history. What better legacy for a songwriter, but to be a part of history?"

A copy of "We Salute" was sent to Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General. Then- U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrook was reeled in. The song was sent

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on to the White House. If then-President Bill Clinton had signed on, the song would have become an instant anthem. However, Clinton and Holbrook both left the White House before any decision was announced. The incoming Bush Administration has been preoccupied with transition and is not thought to be as supportive of the United Nations.

"Music shouldn't be political anyway," Betancourt says.

It is. Back in the Shores, Betancourt had to fend off a direct attack by the Armstrongs, who had a national conservation magazine publish their letter denouncing the flying of the UN flag – the flag raising was visited by a lone protester who handed out flyers claiming a UN takeover of the tiny park that houses the flagpoles. Eventually, the city council voted 3-2 to remove the UN flag, only to have that decision overturned by an outside parliamentarian who ruled the council had voted for and against the same issue in the same meeting. Actually, they voted three times with alternating results.

The debate has since died. The flag still is flying.

Now, Betancourt is leaving for New York to give "We Salute" a further push towards the upper echelon of the United Nations. He goes with a song in his heart and on his lips, and the betting here is that he'll also be singing as lustily as ever when the opportunity comes.

